

A Damsel or Two

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A DAMSEL OR TWO ^{2/12/16}

CHAPTER I

"I'M not sure, sir," said the man, when Colonel Selwood inquired if Mr. Mellor was in the hotel. "I'm not sure, sir. What name, sir?" said the man. He was the kind of servant who manages to suggest that the propinquity of his master is largely dependent on the name of his visitor.

"Colonel Selwood," said Colonel Selwood, with a nervous alertness that did not escape the observant man.

"I'm afraid he's not in just now, sir," said the man. He knew that nervousness as well as alertness seldom found his master at home. "You have an appointment perhaps, sir?" he added.

"I have no appointment," but Mr. Mellor will see me," said Colonel Selwood. He was a middle-aged man—tall, well-made, and with a white moustache that suggested a campaigner. People meeting him for the first time began to talk, after a glance at him and a brief calculation, of the First

Nile Expedition—some ante-dated their remarks by a year or two and spoke of the Zulu War or Majuba Hill. They wondered what was his private opinion of Majuba Hill. All such people were right: he had been a Captain of Hussars during the South African Campaign of 1879 and 1880, and he had been a Major in the Camel Corps.

"Very good, sir," said the servant, disappearing through the least expressive door that ever Colonel Selwood had watched close: one could not hear that door close. It somehow made people think of velvet. These were the unimaginative. It made the imaginative think of a mouse—or was it the velvet paws (with something hidden beneath) of a cat that plays with a mouse?

What Colonel Selwood thought of was a fox that he had seen the week before crawling under the bracken of a covert—only for a moment, however, and not definitely, for the room was full of people, and therefore not tending to sustained thought. It was a sort of ante-room to the suite occupied in the Coniston House Hotel, Piccadilly, by Mr. Joseph Mellor, the great financier of the year. Almost every year has now its great financier, and any one who is scrupulous in regard to dates should be warned against the danger of confusing the year of a great financier's glory with the year of his prosecution. Dates having reference to the career of a great public man are so apt to get mixed.

Colonel Selwood thought of the fox for one

bad name. Fifty thousand! I give you my word of honour, Selwood, that the most I ever gave a man for letting his name go on the back of a prospectus was twenty thousand. Frankly, I don't believe that any man's name is worth more. As a matter of fact it's only when a prospectus wants a bit of stiffening that any name is worth so much."

"I thought it better to come to you direct rather than to write about this business," said Selwood. "You see——"

"The way those chaps try to bleed me would take your breath away, Selwood, if you only knew it," resumed Mr. Mellor. "Twenty thousand here—thirty thousand there—the money must be flung about before we get a thing on its legs, and then every one talks about the mammoth sums that I clear off a flotation. There's de Crecy, as good a chap as lives, but he comes here wanting twenty thousand for letting his name be put on the back of our new Flag of England deal. 'Twenty thousand is over the market price for that commodity, de Crecy, old chap,' said I. 'Is it?' said he. 'Not much, if you clear a million off the deal, like you did off the Quinine Trust.' He had the cheek to accuse me of clearing a million off Quinines, when all I made was six hundred thousand—I give you my sacred word of honour, Selwood—a paltry six hundred thousand!"

"Still, that was better than nothing," said Selwood. His own financial troubles seemed wretchedly small

now that Mellor was sneering at half millions. What was a matter of a few shares in an old-established bank when the other was tossing millions about as if they were tin counters?

"You've no notion how I'm bled, Selwood," continued the financier. "Every one looks on me as fair game for blackmail. I hope to heavens I'll have a chance some day of rounding on the lot of them. It will surprise the world to learn how public men—members of Parliament, members of the Carlton Club, by George, sir—are ready to sell their souls; but wasn't it playing a bit low down for the archdeacon to abuse me like a pickpocket, simply because I had asked him what he thought of the chances of floating a Bible Trust—buying up all the vested interests in Bible societies, and then running them so as to limit the output and so raise the value on the market? I gave the archdeacon the option of heading the list of directors—I assure you I did; and I offered him a hundred founders' shares if he could get the archbishop for us; but if I had been a hard shell atheist he couldn't have abused me more. And that, mind, after I had made that offer about the Abbey. Is it any wonder that infidelity has become rampant? Is it any wonder that the Established Church of our country—this great England of ours, mind—should be tottering to its fall? No one abhors Nonconformity more than myself, Selwood, and yet sometimes I think . . . Ah, never mind. But you'll agree with me that in-

gratitude . . . I can't put up those spires under a hundred thousand pounds apiece. Think of that !”

“It's a lot of money,” said Selwood.

“I should have been able to get at the whole Chapter for half the money,” said Mr. Mellor. “I would have got them if there remained among them any real affection for the Church. But no, they are not sincere. It's things like this that make a man lose faith in all that he once revered, it is indeed. But I'm in treaty for a newspaper at this moment—the most powerful organ in England, sir, and my three-year-olds are entered for all the big events, so I think I'll pull through. When the archdeacon hears that I've won the Derby, he'll wish that he hadn't spoken. Well, good day. It was friendly of you to drop in like this. I'm always glad to see my friends. They don't find that my head is turned because I happen to be at the top of the tree, do they now? No, I'm a simple English country gentleman first, and a man of business after.”

“It was as a man of business I came to you to-day,” said Selwood, as Mr. Mellor got upon his feet and glanced at the clock. “I didn't mean to delay you long. I only wish to talk to you about those shares of Rockingham's.”

“What shares are those—Rockinghams? I don't seem to remember,” said Mr. Mellor. “Rockingham's? Isn't there a Rockingham's Bank? Of course there's a Rockingham's Bank. A one-horse concern—a family-chaise sort of bank, eh?”

"You must surely recollect that I deposited with you the hundred shares which I held in Rockingham's Bank, as security for the advance you made to me to 'meet the call upon those confounded Richland Marshes," said Selwood quickly. He was beginning to be irritated.

"Oh, that must have been a year ago—yes, quite a year ago. How can you expect a chap to remember trifles like that of a year's standing?" asked Mr. Mellor. "When a chap is in the way of handling millions how can he be expected to remember such things as—what did you call them?—Rocking-horses? Ha! not a bad name for them—Rocking-horses! If they ever reached the House that's what they'd be called. Well, what about your Rocking-horses, Selwood?"

"There's only this about my Rockingham shares, Mr. Mellor; I want them back now, and I have brought you a cheque for the amount of the advance you made to me."

"Oh, you want them back, do you? I understood that you sold them outright to me."

"You are bent on proving that what you said just now is true: when a man has been handling millions he cannot be expected to remember the details of such trifles as a couple of thousand. But it so happens that the shares were only to be held by you until I should be in a position to repay you the two thousand two hundred pounds which you advanced to me."

"That's a bit queer, isn't it, considering that the shares were duly transferred to me?"

"It was undoubtedly queer that you should insist, as you did, on having the transfer duly made to you."

"It was jolly queer, considering that you could have gone to any bank in the kingdom and got the advance made to you on the same security. Why didn't you go to your bank and get the money, Selwood, instead of coming to me?"

"Good heavens, man, don't you remember that it was you yourself who made the offer to find the money for me on the security of those shares? You were staying down at my place, and you agreed to let me have back the shares when I should get the money. Well, here's the money."

Mr. Mellor looked at his visitor with perturbing deliberation, then he flung the end of his cigar into the grate, and selected another with a deliberation that was almost ludicrous. He cut off the end and struck a match. After half a dozen exhalations he looked Selwood straight in the face, and said,

"Dear old chap, I can remember anything in reason, but give me a chance—give me a chance."

"What do you mean by that?—give you a chance?" asked Selwood.

"I mean, Selwood, that you should talk of business to business men in business hours, and then go about your business," said Mellor. "I mean that those shares in Rockingham's Bank were sold to me at a fair price, and that I'm not inclined to part with them."

CHAPTER III

COLONEL SELWOOD was on his feet in a moment.

Mr. Mellor continued smoking away quietly with his head slightly bent. He was plainly thinking out something in which millions were involved. The question of a couple of thousands had ceased to swim into his ken.

Colonel Selwood sat down.

"Mr. Mellor, I must ask you to recall the terms of that transaction of ours," he said.

"I have too much on hand, and that's a fact," said Mr. Mellor. "It's the right thing for a man like me to have a racing stud, don't you know? I don't want to be anything better than an English country gentleman. I have a black pig or two—I mean to show what can be done with black pigs—and a race horse or two. I didn't buy them to make cats' meat of them, but to race them. It's expected of me—the public have come to expect it of me. And then there's the theatre—I am backing the Legitimate, you know. It's about time that Shakespeare got a chance in this town, isn't it? Well, I'm going to give good old Shakespeare his chance at last—Shakespeare and Miss Roy Deveen. Fine woman,

Miss Deveen ! A chap should do something for Art before he dies ; and I'm going to do my little for Shakespeare—he's such a true Englishman. Shakespeare is the poet of the English country gentleman, Selwood, and——”

“Mr. Mellor,” said Selwood, “you know as well as I do that the terms on which you got those shares of mine into your possession were, that they should pass again into my hands so soon as I repaid you the two thousand pounds which I borrowed from you. I told you that the shares had been held by my family since the year after Waterloo, and that I meant to leave them intact to my daughters. Possession of them will at least keep my daughters from starvation.”

“I'm prepared to lose a lot of money on Shakespeare, but I shall have the satisfaction of feeling when I come to die that I have done something for Art,” said Mr. Mellor.

“By the Lord Harry, you shall tell me what you mean to do before I leave this room,” said Colonel Selwood, giving the table a rap that set the pens and ink quaking—every table in every room of Mr. Mellor's suite bore pens and ink : so many things needed to be signed in a hurry.

But Mr. Mellor did not quake. Table rapping was quite an ordinary occurrence in his rooms ; it did not suggest to him the presence of anything from the spirit world.

“Do you think that I am the sort of man to—to——. Here's your cheque, Mellor. I want those shares of

mine—of my daughters'. I don't care the toss of a penny for all the Shakespeares in the world!" cried Selwood.

"All the Shakespeares in the world?" tried Mellor with his hands uplift. "All the Shakespeares in—— Ah, I believe I heard that there was a Belgian Shakespeare; but don't talk that way of our Shakespeare, Selwood—our Shakespeare—the Shakespeare of the English country gentleman."

"You have not yet given me an answer about the business that brought me here," said Colonel Selwood. His voice was becoming tremulous. His face had already become pale.

"I have given you your answer," said Mellor; his voice, hitherto mellifluous to a point of irritation, had become a snarl, and his face, hitherto bland to a point of exhaustion, had become the face of the animal that snarls. "Look ye here, Selwood, old chap, eighteen months ago I was in a small way—I was at the C.B. stage of financing. I was one of those chaps who are glad to pick up a C.B. for the back of a prospectus that needs stiffening—that's why I thought so much of you: you were entitled to put 'C.B.' after your name. But now I'm a bit beyond that: I'm among the Grâces. His Grace the Duke of Cinque Ports—His Grace the Duke of Kerriemuir—bless your heart, I can have them for any prospectus I draw up. It's K.G.'s and K.T.'s that I have behind me now. I'm out of sight of you and your C.B., Selwood, old chap, so you've come to the wrong

shop if you want to do a bit of bluff. But although you are no use to me, I'll show you that I am still your friend by advising you to put that money which you say you have in your pocket, into my new Colonial Dairy State Developments ; it will be out this day week—capital, four million. Directors, His Grace the Duke of Cinque Ports—he got eighteen thousand five hundred for that ; I got him cheap—dirt cheap ; the market price of a duke at the head of the list is twenty thousand ; second, His Grace the Duke of Kerriemuir, K.T. ; third, the right honourable Viscount Crecy and Poitiers ; fourth—but I've said enough to prove to you that our aim is the development of the Empire—this great and irresistible British Empire, and her Majesty——”

But at this point the thread of Mr. Mellor's discourse was broken, for Colonel Selwood, whose face had been getting gradually paler with every paragraph quoted by Mr. Mellor, and whose fingers were nervously working into a solid ball the roughly printed draft of a prospectus which had been lying on the table, rushed at Mr. Mellor, and kicked the chair from under him, the consequence being that Mr. Mellor was compelled to seat himself, without a moment's procrastination, on the Turkey carpet.

He sat there and looked up at the power which had brought about his fall ; but he did not utter a word. He did not even shout for help in the interval of a fraction of the second that elapsed between the

sudden movement of the chair and his reaching the Turkey rug. He only looked up to the power.

Colonel Selwood was not quite so reticent.

"You hound!" he said. "You infernal swindler! I shall live to see you in the dock, where you should have been long ago."

Then he took his hat from the table, and began to smooth it down—the subtle symbolism of the act may be studied by poets of the Celtic Renaissance. His gloves and stick lay across a chair. He put on his hat and picked them up with great deliberation only one little movement, it might be called a squirm, did Mr. Mellor give, and that was at the picking up of the cane. Selwood looked at him and laughed.

"Hound to the last—hound to the last!" he said, and then he put on his gloves, buttoned them with scrupulous care, and went out of the room and once again into the midst of the crowd of waiting folk.

Selwood looked round and laughed outright, recalling his thought of the Pool of Siloam. The angel to whom they looked for the troubling of the water had himself been in trouble. Colonel Selwood did not think that he would be likely to give an immediate interview to any half-pay sapper with a new mounted infantry saddle to form the basis of a prospectus.

He felt for a short time, as he walked away, in that excellent state of mind of the man who has come from knocking another man down. The snap of the thin coating of varnish which men spread over themselves and call civilisation, conveys to

the carnivora beneath a sense of exultation. He had replied to the civilised brutality of a millionaire with the uncivilised brutality of a man, and he felt quite pleased with himself. He felt that he had got some value for the insults which Mr. Mellor had pressed upon him.

And so he had—some value. The kicking of a chair from under a man undoubtedly takes a high place in the list of casual luxuries. But it may be bought too dear. It was not long before Colonel Selwood began to have an uneasy impression that it might just be possible that he had paid too much for the feeling of exultation of which he had been conscious.

Mr. Mellor had talked to him of the market price of certain commodities—the names of Dukes, the affix of C.B., and so forth; might it not be that he, Colonel Selwood, had given more than its reasonable assessment for the temporary gratification of kicking the chair from under the man?

By the time he had reached his club he had come to the conclusion that he had been taken in, and the fact that he kept biting at his moustache muttering "The hound—the infernal hound!" and other equally vehement phrases, all the way down Piccadilly and St. James's Street, convinced him—though sorely against his will—that he had made a fool of himself in yielding to that impulse which had induced Mr. Mellor to take a hurried seat upon the Turkey carpet.

He found it necessary to mutter a good deal about Mr. Mellor's being a hound—then he thought it well to draw back his lips from his teeth, revealing in the strongest possible way his place among carnivora, and to whisper "The cur!—the miserable cur!"

And then he called him a swine—a contemptible swine.

But even this extreme measure did not give him back his self-respect—the self-respect which he felt he had lost in making such a bad bargain in regard to the knocking down of Mr. Mellor.

He had come up from his place at Husbandman's Selwood that morning with the determination of being firm with Mr. Mellor in the matter of those bank shares, but of resisting the temptation—he thought it possible that he would be tempted—to knock down Mr. Mellor. He had for some time suspected that Mellor was a swindler—a trickster—a vulgar knave, without a shred of honour, without a shred of feeling; but he made a resolution that in no circumstances would he allow his contempt for the fellow to get the better of him.

And yet, before he had been in Mellor's room a quarter of an hour, he had easily yielded to the temptation, and for some time—a short time—thereafter he had felt quite pleased with himself.

. And the worst of the matter was that he began to be pleased with himself once more, after he had reflected for a while upon the result of his connection

with the fellow. He had only been acquainted with Mellor for a year; but a good deal had happened within that space of time. The man's name had not, a year before, been the household word which it had recently become throughout the length and breadth of the land—a name to take possession of all people who were anxious to be rich without going through the drudgery of doing any work worth speaking of, and without being subjected to the irritation of waiting half a lifetime in order to attain to that end. Mr. Mellor had been recommended to him as a shrewd man on the Stock Exchange—a man who had floated a company or two with considerable advantage to the people who had been allotted shares, and, presumably, to Mr. Mellor himself also—but people did not insist on this latter point.

This was the man for whom Colonel Selwood had been looking out for several years—a man who would enable him to make, by the judicious investment of whatever money he had at his command, adequate provision for his two daughters and for the maintenance of the home of his ancestors, who had spent all their available cash in adding to the original structure, not foreseeing the time when the best farms on the estate would lie vacant for years.

It was when Colonel Selwood was in the depths of despair in regard to the letting of his farms, that he began to listen seriously to the stories which

were passed round the smoking-room at his club regarding the fortunes made in the course of a few months by men who had invested in the right stocks.

In nearly all these stories the name of Mr. Mellor occurred. It was this Mellor who had advised young Farquharson to put his bottom dollar into Oceanics, when Oceanics had gone down to 3½, and every one knew that in the course of six months they had risen to 31, enabling young Farquharson, who had about as much brains as a mangold, to make the nice little sum of £32,000. It was this same Mr. Mellor who had presented Reggie Rowan with a cheque for £15,000 odd—the narrators stated the exact sum worked out in shillings and pence—on the morning of his marriage, the result of his investment of £300 the year before, in the New Vesta Lamp Company. It was also Mr. Mellor who had induced Tommy Traddles to sell out his Volatiles just at the right moment, thereby getting rid of the responsibility of paying up a call of £4 a share.

Clearly Mr. Mellor was the man of the moment, and Selwood considered himself fortunate in getting an introduction to him.

Mr. Mellor had by this time cut himself adrift from the Stock Exchange; and people said that the Stock Exchange had better look out, for if Mr. Mellor set up an opposition shop, the Stock Exchange would pretty soon go to the wall. Mr.

Mellor took a humbler view of the consequence of his secession. He disclaimed any intention of seeking to compass the ruin of the many really respectable men who were still connected with the Stock Exchange. Oh yes, whatever people might say, he was quite ready to believe that there were still some respectable men on the Exchange—all that his secession meant was that he found the Exchange a bit old-fashioned, with its restrictions and its rules and its customs. He rather thought that he could do better for his friends if he had a freer hand than the rules allowed him.

The result of his new operations proved that he had not overestimated the value of his freedom, and for some months there was no name more popular than the name of Mr. Mellor, and by no one was his name held in higher esteem than by Colonel Selwood.

Colonel Selwood had, by his assistance, cleared upwards of £10,000, although he had only had a couple of thousands to start with.

And then the name of Colonel Selwood, C.B., began to appear on a prospectus or two—shyly, at first, and only in connection with humble flotations; for Colonel Selwood bore a certain resemblance to the poor gentlewoman who called “muffins,” very gently, hoping that no one should hear her: he allowed his name to be put on the prospectuses, rather hoping that it might not get much about. But he soon got over his early shyness, and before long he found his name in the best of good company—among

the names of peers—of the United Kingdom, not merely Irish—past Lord Mayors, with the title of baronet—ex-city sheriffs, who had escaped prosecution and could not be compelled to relinquish their Knight-hoods, members of Parliament, and wine merchants, not necessarily of Jewish extraction

Friendship with Mr. Mellor was the penalty which he had to pay for the distinction and the emoluments which he enjoyed. He had never taken kindly to the man ; but he was reasonable enough to reflect upon the unreasonableness of refusing, say, to travel by a convenient train because he might have an objection to the colour of the paint inside the carriages. He felt that it would be ridiculous of him to refuse to make a fortune by the aid of Mr. Mellor, because of the series of accidents that caused Mr. Mellor to assume the habits and the manners of the complete bounder.

He knew that Mellor was a bounder ; but seeing peers, even those who were of good family, slapping him on the back and showing themselves in other ways on the best of terms with him, Colonel Selwood asked himself who the mischief was Colonel Selwood that he should be squeamish about associating with a man because he now and again seemed to be a bit of a bounder. After all, the question of bounding was wholly dependent upon the point of view that one assumed in relation to the bounder. An act, which, coming from a certain person, would be accounted an excellent piece of humour, would, if

done by another, be held up to contempt as the performance of a bounder.

Of this fact Colonel Selwood was well aware, having been in the British army for twenty-five years. And so he had not shrunk from the friendship of Mr. Mellor, although he felt that he was a bounder; and neither had he shrunk from making a fortune by the assistance of Mr. Mellor, although he felt that he was a bounder.

And this fact must be regarded as bearing out his theory that much depends on the point of view which one takes of social ephemera, especially such as are born without wings and are thus forced to progress by the less delicate system of bounding.

CHAPTER IV

BUT at last there came a day when the descendant of the Crusader was startled into a reconsideration of his position and his responsibilities. He had allowed his name to appear on about half a dozen prospectuses as a director, and he had never directly received a penny for its use. All that he had got in exchange for the use of his name—not forgetting his C.B.: the framers of the prospectuses never omitted those letters—was the privilege of purchasing a certain number of shares at par and, later on, of making the acquaintance of the other members of each board. Among these companies there was one which was named The Saccharine Confectionery Company, Limited, and it had for its aim the manufacture of sweetmeats which might be eaten with impunity by persons of a gouty tendency. Its capital was—but it is immaterial what its capital was, and anything beyond six figures has the effect of creosote upon the nerves. Colonel Selwood had put ten thousand pounds into this concern, and felt quite like a philanthropist in doing so. As a matter of fact, Mr. Mellor had alluded to him as “our philanthropist” to some of his, Mr. Mellor’s,

associates in finance. But Colonel Selwood belonged to a military club, a good many members of which had a tendency to gout, and yet were very fond of the lighter forms of confectionery. He had no difficulty in crediting the figures given in the prospectus as to the probable weight in tons of the non-gouty dainties that would be consumed by the public when once the company got their wares on the market.

"I never met a man in my life who hadn't a tendency to gout," said Mr. Mellor, in dealing with the splendid possibilities of Saccharine. And when Colonel Selwood reflected, he acknowledged that, even outside a Service Club, there is a considerable amount of gout. Yes, on the whole he could not name any man of his acquaintance who was not a victim to gout in some form.

Six months after the floating of this company Mr. Mellor, meeting him in regard to another flotation, said,

"You would do well to unload your Saccharines. They're at a premium of ten shillings ; next week they'll be selling at five shillings apiece instead of five pound ten. I've unloaded mine—all but half a dozen."

"What do you mean?" asked Selwood. "Don't things promise well?"

"There'll be a petition for winding up lodged on Monday," said Mellor.

Colonel Selwood was staggered. He felt as if

some one had told him that a petition was about to be presented to the Court to make him a bankrupt.

But Mr. Mellor was only chuckling.

"Unload to-day, and it will be all right," he said.

"You mean to say—good heavens! But I understood that the business—I was given to understand that it was a good thing—surely it was a good thing."

"Oh, quite good enough to float—quite good enough to float," acquiesced Mellor. "I wouldn't throw all your shares on the market at once; you have still a week. Do the thing gradually."

"Do you suppose that I—I—a director of the company, knowing that the concern will cease to exist within a week, would sell my shares to an outsider—some one who believes that they are still worth five pounds?" asked the descendant of the Crusader, with a note of menace in his voice.

Mr. Mellor stared at him.

"What's the good of having information if you decline to avail yourself of it?" he asked, with the rumble of a snarl in his voice. But he tried to neutralise its effects by an embrocationary laugh, while he said,

"My dear sir, the man who invents a way of making omelettes without breaking eggs had—had—well, he had better float his invention and I'll guarantee that the shares go up. There's no making a fortune if you always wear white gloves. If

you don't get the better of the other chaps, the other chaps will get the better of you. That's a good enough motto for me in my way of life, and I daresay you found it a good enough motto for your way of life when you were in the army. It's a good motto to go into action with. It makes you fight like—ah, you needn't give that squeamish squirm, Selwood, old man. We're all on the same level; we were made like the other beasts, to prey upon one another. Fighting is as much a part of Nature's scheme as being born or dying. For my own part I can't bear the sight of bloodshed; but I'm jolly glad that I unloaded my Saccharines in time."

Colonel Selwood did not try to reason with the man. He did not even call the man a swindler. He did not even break off all relations with the man.

Still, the evening of that day had come before he could bring himself to shrug his shoulders and say that in these matters everything depended on the point of view. He had heard it said that the Ten Commandments don't run East of Suez, which sounded rather strange, considering that it was East of Suez that the Ten Commandments had originated; but having spent some years in India he had learnt to be quite tolerant.

Still, he lost over ten thousand pounds by his failing to acquire the standpoint from which Mr. Mellor had accustomed himself to look at such a

transaction as the selling of shares which he knew to be worthless, to a person who believed them to be sound.

And yet he did not break off his relations with Mr. Mellor. He knew that in diplomacy the breaking off of relations with another power is almost equivalent to the declaration of war; and if it was the same in finance, he felt that he would prefer having Mr. Mellor as his friend rather than his enemy.

He even went the length of inviting Mr. Mellor on a Saturday to Monday visit to Selwood. To be exact, Mr. Mellor had invited himself down to Selwood; and as the colonel had come to him for information regarding the possibility of obtaining a loan of some few thousands of pounds, and as Mr. Mellor had said that he would like to chat over the question with him far away from the distractions of town—even then it was apparent that Mr. Mellor had aspirations after the simple life of an English country gentleman—Colonel Selwood could not see his way to decline to be his host for two days.

The great financier was clearly impressed by the mellow glories of Selwood. The splendid faded tapestries of the great hall were typical of the house of Selwood; they were more imposing in their faded condition than if they had been new. The beauty of autumn hung over the house; and Mr. Mellor, who was not without imagination—had he not composed countless prospectuses?—knew what its summer must have been, and was so impressed that, after

dinner, he offered to lend his host the two thousand pounds that he needed, on the security of some shares which had been held by the Selwood family for close upon a hundred years in the Rockingham Bank—one of those good old-fashioned country concerns of whose shares the Stock Exchange knows nothing. It was far too high class for the Stock Exchange, Mr. Mellor said in a feeling way; he knew very little about Rockingham's Bank, but he knew a good deal about the Stock Exchange. One would be shocked to see a fine old family solicitor pleading noisily in Bow Street Police Court; and in like manner the thought of a man with a shiny hat yelling out the name of Rockingham's in the House was revolting to any person of taste.

Mr Mellor was a man of taste, so without further question he offered to lend his host the money that he needed, only asking for a transfer of the shares until Selwood found it convenient to repay him the amount of the loan, with four per cent. interest; Colonel Selwood wanted to say five per cent., but Mr. Mellor was firm—four per cent.

He also insisted on giving Colonel Selwood a written guarantee that he would not offer the shares for sale as long as his host paid interest on the loan. Six months had actually passed before Colonel Selwood awoke to a knowledge of the fact that Mr. Mellor was receiving every quarter a dividend at the rate of sixteen per cent. on the shares, so that the rate of interest which he was to get for his •

accommodation was just twenty per cent., less income tax.

He began to believe that he was wanting in business training, and so he had been wise enough to avoid Mr. Mellor, who certainly was not so deficient, during the year that he had spent scraping together the two thousand odd pounds for the redemption of the Rockingham Stock. The result of his application to Mr. Mellor for the return of the shares was to make him still more fully acquainted with the disproportion, as regards a knowledge of business methods, existing between Mr. Mellor and himself.

He had left home that morning firmly resolved that, whatever the attitude of Mr. Mellor might be in regard to himself, he would never lose his temper—he would never do anything undignified. The fact that he felt it to be necessary to make such a resolution proves that, in spite of Mr. Mellor's fame having increased enormously during the year, he was not without his doubts in regard to Mr. Mellor's honour.

Well, he had failed to adhere to his resolution.

Instead of using his powers of persuasion upon Mr. Mellor to obtain back his shares—instead of humouring him by listening to his boasting of the position to which he had attained, and flattering him on every point of the compass—instead of proving himself to be a finished diplomatist in order to obtain possession of his shares, he had

given way to his irritation of the moment and had grossly insulted Mr. Mellor: it is certainly outside the recognised limits of diplomacy to kick a chair from under the person who is to be conciliated; and therefore Colonel Selwood asked for a large whiskey and Apollinaris instead of a small one, when he got to his club, and felt, while partaking of that refreshment, that he had been a fool.

And then Monty Hillingford came into the smoking-room and shouted, "Hallo, you're the very chap I was wanting to see."

"Hallo!" responded Selwood, not quite so cheerily. Lord Montague had been his subaltern in the first Camel Corps. "What can you possibly want to see me for?"

"It's only about that chap Mellor," said Lord Monty. "He has come on, hasn't he? He is said to be the most powerful man in London. They have taken him on at the Carlton, you know."

"I don't know anything about it. He's the rankest bounder in London, if that's what you mean," said Selwood.

"I've heard that; but one puts up with that when a chap is able to put you on the way to rake in half a million or so," said Lord Monty. "Now I don't mind a bounder like that, and so I want you, as I know you and he work together, to introduce me to him. I've a thing that would just suit him to float, and I think there's money in it."

"You've come to the wrong side of the river"

for what you want, Monty, my lad," said Selwood. "I've just kicked that swindler into a corner of his own room."

Lord Monty opened his eyes very wide, and whistled the note of a starling.

"I suppose it always does come to that in time," said he. "All these chaps do get kicked in the long run. I thought that you and he——"

"A year ago I was idiot enough to fancy that I could make money the way these men make money; I was fool enough to fancy that there was nothing underhand in their methods. Well, I've paid close upon twenty thousand pounds in learning that they are a shifty crew," said Selwood.

"That's too high a price to pay for a bit of information that I could have given you a good many years ago," said Lord Monty. "Still, you kicked Mellor into a corner, and after all that's something. I suppose I'll have to get Cinque Ports to bring us together. Cinque Ports is doing well with Mellor just now. But of course he'll kick him into a corner some day. Ta-ta."

He strolled off as soon as he had found his eyeglass, and had polished it highly.

A couple of other men hailed Selwood from a table near the door, when he was going away shortly afterward.

"We haven't seen anything of you for long," said one—he was on the Head-quarters Staff.

"Oh, Selwood has become too big a financier to

look in at the Shebeen," said the other, who was an Irishman. "They say that you have cleared a million out of those companies that Mellor got you into ; but I suppose if you netted half of that it was the most."

Selwood laughed grimly.

"I don't believe that the aggregate touched even the half million," said he. "And as for Mellor——"

But here he stopped. However meritorious the act might seem in the eyes of these men, he would refrain from boasting of having kicked Mellor.

(After all he had only kicked Mellor's chair)

"He's a bit of a phenomenon, that Mellor," said one of the men after waiting with well-concealed expectancy for Selwood to complete his sentence. "Yes, Mellor is the topic just now. Every woman you meet at dinner begins to talk of him. They all want to meet him ; when they find that he is not among our acquaintance they take no further interest in us."

"One should get to know Mellor if only as an act of self-protection," said the other man. "Yes, Mellor is a bit of a wonder in his own way. He certainly has a wonderful instinct in finding out good things."

"He's a swine, isn't he?" said the first.

"I shouldn't wonder ; but then it's with pigs men discover truffles," remarked the second.

"I'm off," said Selwood.

And he went off. He felt that if he had failed to

restrain himself once during the day, there was no reason why he should yield to the temptation of gratifying the curiosity of these men. He could see that they were trying to draw him on to reveal all that he knew about Mellor. He did not doubt that some of the more observant of his acquaintance had noticed that he had not recently been heard of in association with Mellor, and would very much like to know why this was.

His judgment on this point did not mislead him.

He wondered how people explained the falling off in the friendly relations that once existed between Mellor and himself. He had a notion that most people knew that he had been severely pinched in regard to the Saccharine Confectionery Company; but he had no notion that the most plausible explanation that men gave to one another of the absence of his name from Mellor's great schemes, was that he, Selwood, was a gentleman.

And yet that was just what people said, although the name of the Duke of Cinque Ports appeared on the prospectuses of the latest of Mr. Mellor's flotations.

CHAPTER V

"WE shan't have to sell Jimmy, whatever happens," said Joan.

"That's lucky, isn't it? considering that Jimmy's intrinsic value fluctuates with the seasons, at some point between seven-and-six and eight shillings," said Muriel.

"That's unkind," said Joan, as the faithful terrier—he was alluded to by the indulgent as a terrier—put his forepaws on the edge of her dress and began scraping away diligently at a speck of dust which he eventually succeeded in removing, with a portion of the material, before turning the whole width into a sleeping carpet. "Yes, you're distinctly unkind to poor Jimmy. When Jimmy is at his best—his very best—he would be worth quite half a sovereign to any one who might want him."

"You'd have some trouble finding so eccentric a person," said Muriel. "Oh, yès ; Jimmy is distinctly an acquired taste." .

"Yes, he is a sort of caviar among curs," said Joan. "But when you do get to like him you like him big. Isn't that a fact, Jimmy? Oh, Jimmy dear, you mustn't go asleep on the feeble train of my frock.

Come now, off you go! Come, no nonsense! Jimmy, I'm ashamed of you. Rats, Jimmy, rats."

"Try him with cats," suggested Muriel, when Jimmy played 'possum, and declined to charge his quarters even with the allurements offered to him—with the stress laid on the sibilant—by his mistress. "Try him with cats; when rodentia fail, felinae will fetch."

"Cats, Jimmy, cats!" hissed Joan, but Jimmy only raised a ragged ear an inch into the air. He could not but recognise the thoughtfulness of the lady on whose dress he was lying, to provide him with the material for a chase, but he had just dined.

"Isn't he a nuisance?" said Joan.

"Appeal to his better nature," suggested Muriel. "Tell him that we are ruined; and that you may never be able to buy another dress. No animal—not even Jimmy—is altogether bad."

"Can you not be serious for one moment?" asked Colonel Selwood in a tone of sorrowful appeal, first to his elder daughter Muriel, then to Joan, her sister. "Can you not be serious? I can assure you that the situation is serious enough, though you seem to fancy that the whole thing is a joke. When I said 'ruin' I assure you I did not mean anything else."

"We are so sorry, are we not, Joan?" said Muriel.

"Very—very sorry," acquiesced Joan impressively. "Shall we have to let Selwood and live in lodgings

in Bayswater or Bloomsbury? Shall we be called 'genteel'? I hope that no one will call us genteel."

"There you go," cried her father. "You treat this disaster as if it were but the unhappy chapter in a novel."

"And perhaps, after all, that's just what it is," said Joan.

"I wish to heaven it was!" cried her father, rising from the table and going to the window looking out over the grounds to where the lake lay coldly grey among all the gold of the autumn foliage of the park.

The girls glanced at each other. After only a little pause, they rose and went slowly and silently and gently to him. He felt a sympathetic hand on each of his arms.

"There's no one dead, dear old daddy; and nothing is very bad unless some one is dead," said Muriel.

"No, no one has died, we're all together still," said Joan. "Come, dear, tell us exactly how bad things are. Of course we shall not have to leave the old place."

He continued gazing out of the window without making any response for a long time. The golden foliage made the autumn a millionaire even within the limits of the lawn. It seemed a poor consolation for the man who had reached his last thousand pounds to look out at the prodigality of the season.

"Do tell us just how we stand," said Joan ; and then Colonel Selwood took his hands out of his pockets and turned round to the girls.

They loosed their hold of his arms to' allow of his turning, but resumed their hold a moment afterwards.

"Tell us exactly how bad everything is," said Muriel. "Did you see that horrid man in town? I hope you kept your temper, dear ; my last words to you were to remind you not to lose your temper."

"I knocked him down," said her father mournfully.

"What ! Well, that's something, anyway !" said Joan.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Muriel, shaking her head. "Of course, it's very gratifying, and that—still—but you don't mean to say that he refused to carry out his bargain ? "

"He is a swindler—a contemptible swindler," said her father. He freed himself from the sympathetic restraint of his daughters' hands and began walking to and fro on the well-worn oak of the dining-room floor. "You could have no notion how the fellow behaved. Irritating? oh, far more than irritating. Insulting?—worse than insulting—he said things——"

"Don't mind the things he said ; people don't worry because pitch happens to have a nasty smell ; they only avoid going near the pitch in future," cried Muriel. "You'll not go near that—that man again. Oh, he's sure to be found out some day—sure."

"He doesn't seem near that day just now," said Colonel Selwood. "He is hand and glove with men who a few years ago would have knocked you down if you had suggested that they would ever associate with him."

"But you knocked him down, so you got the best of them all there," suggested Joan. "And of course he said that he had bought the shares in Rockingham's outright?"

"How did you know that he would do that?" asked her father, opening his eyes.

"Because I knew that would be business. He is a business man; and the best business man is the man who gets the best of his neighbour in any matter of business," said Joan. "Never mind: the shares are gone; we needn't bother any more about them."

But that is just what Colonel Selwood seemed determined to do. He walked up and down the room saying things about Mellor, and accusing himself of having been a fool—of robbing his daughters—of allowing himself to be taken in by a vulgar plunderer, whose devices any child should have been able to see through.

"Oh," cried Muriel, "you *shouldn't talk such rubbish. You know as well as we do that if things have been going steadily to the bad for years, the ten or fifteen thousand pounds that you expected to make by mixing with these horrid people would not have saved us."

"But the Rockingham shares," cried her father. "How could I have been such a fool as to let them get into his hands? I suspected him from the day he told me to clear out of the Saccharine' concern, and yet I was fool enough to trust him implicitly in the matter of the Rockingham shares. Eighteen hundred and sixteen—that was the year they came into our family."

"And they oblited in eighteen hundred and ninety-nine; that's all you can put upon their tomb-stones," cried Muried. "Poor old things! Let them rest in peace. Now, pater, no more rhetoric; rhetoric is the last resource of the unimaginative, and we won't confess ourselves so far reduced in circumstances as to be incapable of perceiving how much worse we might be."

"Tell us exactly how we stand," said Joan. "Don't let us have a balance-sheet. A balance-sheet, Chris says, is the only form of mystification remaining to a prosaic age. No, we don't want to be mystified. Only let us know how we stand."

Her father looked from the elder of his daughters to the younger. There they were, standing up before him bright and beautiful and clear-headed, ready and anxious to face the worse, and to laugh in its face. The first thought that he had when looking at them was that it was a great pity he had not entrusted them with the management of his business, taking over the house-keeping himself. They were worth a dozen of him, he now knew. They would

never have done anything so idiotic as to entrust a man whom they distrusted, with shares in exchange for a sum of money which represented—his lawyer had informed him—just one-sixth of what he could have obtained in the ordinary way of business from his own bank on such security. Yes, he felt very strongly that he should have given himself over to buying the mutton and the meal—he should never have trusted his own capacity further than to see that the sirloin of beef had a good fillet ; his daughters should have looked after the disposal of his money.

“I have brought ruin——” he began ; but he got no farther.

“Rhetoric again !” cried Muriel.

“Criminal rhetoric !” cried Joan. “Shall we take this business on our own shoulders, Muriel ? He seems quite hopeless.”

“It has come to that, indeed,” said Muriel, shaking her head. The two girls were now standing face to face, conferring together and leaving him to stare at them. “Look here, dear father. *We* shall have to tell *you* how we stand. For five years Gwenton Farm has been vacant, and for some reason or other the soil has become so bad that no one will have anything to say to it ; there’s two thousand three hundred and eighteen pounds gone in a moment. Isn’t that so ?”

He shook his head in sorrowful acquiescence.

“We can’t go into the particulars of the farms that are unlet—of the money that has been spent to

no purpose upon this dreadful soil of ours," said Joan. "Enough has been said during the past five years to convince us of the hopelessness of doing more than will pay the existing charges on the property; and then, oh, then comes this terror of keeping up this ancestral home of ours; it's splendid, but oh, what a terror!"

"It's as splendid as a volcano," said Muriel. "Splendid, but a terror!"

"You have imagination, my dearest," said Joan. "My fancy soared no higher than the white elephant."

"Never mind, a white elephant will serve the purpose of a general family conversation well enough," said Muriel, ever conciliatory. "Besides, a volcano suggests rhetoric. Anyhow, it's perfectly true; Selwood is a white elephant with an unusually large appetite. 'Lud!' as Lady Betty of the last century would say, 'lud!' the idea of a house with forty-two bedrooms being kept up for three people—and two of them little ones!"

"Selwood must be sacrificed," said Joan, with a flourish.

"There's nothing for it: Selwood must be sacrificed," said her sister. "After all, no matter how great a pet you may make of a white elephant, if it comes to a question of its lying down on you after you've done your best for it, you—you—well, you send for an elephant rifle. We must try to get rid of Selwood. There are lots of people, brewers and shipowners, and government contractors, and com-

pany promoters, who would regard it as a privilege to undertake the support of a whole menagerie, to say nothing of the single albino elephant."

Joan laughed a laugh of defiance; she was defying Fate to do its worst. Muriel nodded her head in agreement with the sentiment of defiance.

Their father stood with the bowed head of a prisoner hearing his sentence pronounced—pale—wordless.

There was a silence in the room, and Jimmy, the mongrel, with the courtesy title of terrier, did not like it. The sound of his nails tapping on the parquet floor, as he walked across the room to the group, was qucer. He put his forepaws as high as they could reach on Muriel's dress, whining, with his head slightly turned to one side as he looked up inquiringly to her face.

"No, no, Jimmy; you are not going to be sold—only Selwood—only Selwood," said the girl, laying her hand on his head.

The next moment both the girls were sobbing in the arms of their father.

CHAPTER VI

THE next day confirmed the opinion which the girls had formed in regard to their position. The family lawyer paid an official visit to Selwood, and took quite an amount of trouble in explaining to the colonel and his daughters how it was that they were in so great straits. He took unnecessary pains over the details—they would all have accepted his word for the worst. When a competent physician has assured you that you cannot live over the week he does not strengthen his position by referring in detail to the disorders which are to be held accountable for the result he predicts. The property had been encumbered for years. For some reason that no one had been able to solve, the greater part of the estate was far from being fertile. Of course, the owners of the soil had never lacked sufficient imagination to enable them to lay the blame of the unproductiveness on the husbandman. It was impossible that the land of a certain group of farms could be miserable while that of the outlying farms was excellent, the owners were ready to affirm, when the husbandmen made their complaints and suggestions of a reduction in the rental.

They had an opportunity of offering this argument to a large number of tenants, for few farmers had sufficient capital to allow of their holding on to their tenancies. And then came the years of terrible agricultural depression, when the two principal farms were without tenants, and Colonel Selwood determined to work his own land.

The experiment extended over five years, and the result took the shape of a very formidable balance on the wrong side of the account in the head bailiff's book, and at last the owner was convinced there was something in the soil that would not be reasoned out of it.

The insusceptibility to argument of the big farms meant an amazing reduction in the income of the estate, and Colonel Selwood began to wish that his ancestors had wavered for a generation or so in their determination to make their place the finest in the county. Alas! they had never faltered. The place was the most expensive in the county. The fourteen gardeners who found constant employment, in the Italian Garden, the Dutch Garden, the old English Garden, the orchid houses, the orangeries—there was half a mile of orangeries—the vineries, and the peach houses were far too few to do all that should be done well. And then the woodmen—the rabbiters, the polemen—no one knew what the duties of a poleman were beyond receiving his twenty-five shillings a week—and the harbourers—the duties of the harbourers were as indefinite as

the well-defined functions of an archdeacon : philologists were even divided on the question as to whether or not their name was an aspirated form of arbourers—the whole army of these dependents had to be paid, with about a dozen staff officers in the form of game-keepers, river-keepers, and gate-lodge keepers.

These were among the ultra-menials ; and the menials—the indoor servants—were nearly as numerous ; for it is impossible to keep up a house with a history unless by the aid of carpenters and plasterers, and tilers and handy-men. These were the men who maintained the material part of a historic house ; and the traditional part was maintained by the butler, the footmen, the housekeeper, the cook and a staff of fifteen or twenty in the servants' hall.

And then there were the horses. . . .

The burden of the whole was greater than any one man could bear, unless he had been born to a brewery or to a colliery or perhaps a ship-building yard. The family lawyer admitted as much, at the same time adding a few graceful words in acknowledgment of the brave fight made by the person who was unfortunate enough to have inherited the most splendid place in the county, with the further encumbrance of the most splendid family traditions. Colonel Selwood had made a capital fight of it, the lawyer said, and he felt that it was rather handsome on his part to go so far ; but all the same the fight was over. The place could not be

kept up. The mortgages of those Selwoods who had been bitten by the tarantula of building during the previous century—the Selwoods who had added a wing to the mansion and had brought from Italy the stones with which the classical portico was built—the Selwoods who had spent forty thousand pounds on the orangeries, designed by Chambers—and who had all the time been laying up an inheritance of gout for their descendants by their hard drinking in sympathy with the traditions of the eighteenth century—the mortgages of these merry fellows, who gambled away their farms and wrote such excellent letters—who were painted by Reynolds and Gainsborough and Opie and Hoppner and Lawrence, to mingle with the immortals done by Lely and Kneller and to hang on the walls of the grand old house for the confusion of their descendants—the mortgages of these Selwoods were too much for those Selwoods who had to face the competition of all the world in the matter of wheat.

“There’s nothing for it, I grieve to say,” said the lawyer, when he had bewildered his three auditors by portentous figures, and had still further bewildered them by his explanation of what those figures meant—by his reading of unbowdlerised passages from some of the leases, which sounded very shocking to girls who had not mastered the technicalities of lawyer’s English—“there is nothing for it, as you have seen, but to get rid of the place. Luckily the greater part of it may be sold.”

"It mustn't be sold," said one of the girls resolutely—so resolutely as to startle the lawyer out of his wits.

"No, it mustn't be sold," said the other. "Only let."

"That's my notion too," said Colonel Selwood. He vaguely remembered just at that moment the old rhyme that he had heard in the nursery about selling the place. It was something prophetic, with the accents laid on the first syllables ; every genuine traditional prophetic doggerel must have the accents laid on the first syllables.

"Should a Selwood Selwood sell
Selwood rings his own death knell."

The lines jingled through the air and returned to him with the jingle of the tin sword on the nursery floor. They had not come into his mind for forty years ; he did not believe that either of his daughters had ever heard them—but both of them had—and now the lilt of them had a queer effect upon him. He was not in the least superstitious, though he always took off his hat to a magpie when he was sure that no one was looking, and felt uneasy for the rest of the day when he could not do so by reason of his having a companion who might put a false construction upon the act—he was not in the least superstitious, but he said firmly,

"The place mustn't be sold. You must get us a tenant for it, Vickers."

"Yes, a really good tenant—who will keep it up as it has been kept up, and pay us a good round sum for the privilege," said Joan.

"Yes; not necessarily a brewer," said Muriel.

Mr. Vickers, the lawyer, not being a married man, had no notion that young women could be so masterful. This pair rather overwhelmed him, in spite of his confidence that he had made himself thoroughly intelligible to them.

He shook his head gravely.

"A tenant," said Joan in response. "Oh, yes, a good tenant."

Her father became frightened. He knew that Mr. Vickers knew all; people are usually reticent in the presence of those who know all.

"Come now, Mr. Vickers," said Muriel, "we'll give you a week—this is Friday—say, till Monday week; by that time we hope that you will have seen your way to entrap a really good tenant. We wouldn't make any rigid inquiries as to his family or its antiquity. What about America? America is a new country—comparatively; there's an unbroken field for the exercise of your ingenuity."

"My dear young lady, there are difficulties," began Mr. Vickers, indulgently deprecatory. He expected to be interrupted by one of those masterful young women and was quite put out when neither of them spoke. "Difficulties," he repeated in a more aggressive key. "Difficulties—obstacles. My dear Colonel, it's not every one that stands in

immediate need of a mansion with forty-odd bedrooms and historic associations."

"No; but there's some one who does. What about South Africa?" said Muriel.

Colonel Selwood once again was led to wish that he had got his daughters to invest his money for him. He was plainly the fool of the family.

Mr. Vickers became very thoughtful. He made certain mystic passes with his hands and occasionally touched his teeth with the feather end of his pen. He seemed trying to reason himself out of an untenable theory.

"True, there are instances," he remarked aloud after a considerable lapse. "You have mentioned the name of America, Miss Selwood. America is undoubtedly a large and rapidly growing community. Some of the best English families are American, if I may be permitted to say so. Those cadet branches which emigrated to the early plantations have thriven in America while the original families have died out in England. But, of course, in the United States the *nouveaux riches* are almost as plentiful as in this country. I have heard of Chicago. Ah, if we could only find some one in Chicago anxious for an English home. I have been told that so strong is the English feeling in the States, it is thought the right thing for one to have a villa in England as well as up the Hudson and at Saratoga."

"Find that man for us, Mr. Vickers," said Joan. "We have a commodious villa to be let; with a

few enlargements and improvements this little place of ours might do for an American in a small way for a year or two until something really worthy of him turned up."

"You can tell him frankly that it is on the bijou side. I would not try to get the better even of a person from Chicago," said Muriel.

"After all, we need not go out of England to find English spirit," said Mr. Vickers. "We have still tobacco, and bacon, and perhaps butter; but I'm not so sure about butter. A brewery is obvious; whiskey is not what it used to be, and coal is on a level with iron. Spinning—a newspaper—yes, money is to be made at both of these, but you must spin rubbish and your newspaper must be for the million. We have spent two hundred million on what we call education, and the result is that *Tit-bits* pays ten per cent.—or is it twenty?"

"We don't want education; we want a tenant," said Joan.

"I am talking of the fields," said Mr. Vickers. "We must consider the fields still open to us in our search."

"There are gold fields and diamond fields," suggested Muriel.

"There is one man in South Africa, but he is, I regret to say, modest," said the lawyer.

"That's bad for us; we don't want a modest tenant; we want a man who cannot live unless he has sixty servants dependent on him," said Joan.

"Still, a man who wants to run the British Empire might undertake Selwood by way of practice," said Muriel.

"The man is not available just now," said the lawyer. "He is waiting for England to declare war against the man who stood in his way."

"Yes, in his way to Cairo by a new route," said Joan. "I know that man thinks of himself as the hub of the fly wheel of the mills of God."

"Are we not drifting?" suggested Colonel Selwood gently. He had listened to all the masterful talk of his daughters in admiration for some time; but, after all, he was the owner of Selwood; he was entitled to have a voice in the question of its future. "Are we not drifting?" he asked mildly, and every one looked at him. "I don't see why we need depart from the abstract consideration of a tenant for Selwood. It seems—well, premature, to talk about individuals at the present stage."

"Our father is quite right," said Muriel. "We are idiotic to think of individuals just yet; it will be time enough to discuss them when we have their photographs in a row before us."

"I am sure that, as usual, our interests are quite safe in Mr. Vickers' hands," said Joan.

Mr. Vickers just prevented himself from bowing—he barely did it; it was a narrow thing. He allowed himself to smile; his smile had a *nisi prius* twist about it; it was strictly noncompromising; it did not bind him down to any ultimate view of the matter.

"I shall certainly do my best," said he. "I daresay it may be done—not immediately, of course. Selwood is not a suburban cottage."

"You could build a full-sized suburb out of the stories of Selwood," said the owner.

"What a pity they didn't do it!" said Joan.

"For heaven's sake!" cried Mr. Vickers in startled protest, and with an appropriate action of uplifted hands. This young woman was going too far, he clearly thought. The firm of Vickers had been associated with the Selwood family for a century and a half. The great-grandfather of the existing representative of the firm was the man who had negotiated the mortgages for the claret-drinking, faro-playing great-grandfather of the existing representative of the family. (He wrote such beautiful letters!) The honour of Selwood was very dear to Mr. Vickers. He did not like to hear it treated with levity.

The Vickers were most competent lawyers, people said. The most competent lawyers are those who are known to make a handsome competency out of their clients. The Messieurs Vickers knew that so long as they upheld the House of Selwood, the House of Selwood would uphold them.

"Then that's settled," said the colonel, quite cheerfully.

"I suppose, dear father, that you and Mr. Vickers will settle how much you are to pay annually to the tenant—when he is found," said Muriel.

"How much he is to pay me, you mean," said her father. "Well, as to that——"

"No ; I meant just what I said," replied the girl. "We all know that it is the keeping up of the place that is ruinous. It would pay you quite well to give any one a thousand a year toward the keeping up of the place."

Colonel Selwood was silent. He was quite well aware of the truth of what his daughter said.

"If we succeed in getting a satisfactory tenant, Miss Joan," said the lawyer, "I think that we shall not be called on to make such a contribution as you suggest—not without some reason, I admit—to be equitable."

"The more nearly a tenant approaches to your views, the more satisfactory he will be, Mr. Vickers," said Joan. "Still——"

"Good heavens !" cried Colonel Selwood, "are we not only to let the place, but to pay a tenant for living in the house? Well, I hope it hasn't come to that yet."

"I hope not," said Joan. "But——"

"Oh, but me no buts," cried he, in the style of his eighteenth-century ancestors who negotiated the mortgages and wrote those interesting letters. "If we cannot get a tenant who will be willing to pay us a price for the place it must remain on our hands. That's the last word that need be said on the subject."

"We are in the hands of Mr. Vickers," said Muriel, in the tone of the consoling clergyman who, when

he has come to the end of his ethical resources, says a few courteous words about Providence. "Of course you will stay to dinner, Mr. Vickers. We have not yet parted with Mrs. Harvey, and her genius is as brilliant as ever. We have always a good dinner, but we shall have an especially good one to-night, if you remain, and Joan will sing for you afterwards."

"I'll sing you Songs of Araby, Mr. Vickers, and papa will tell you his stories of the other Arabi whom he so cruelly crushed at Tel-el-Kebir. Can you resist such allurements?" cried Joan.

She knew that Mr. Vickers felt inclined to ask why the singing should be dragged into the matter; the allurements of Mrs. Harvey's cooking were quite enough for him.

He confessed as much by the emphasis which he laid on the charm of Joan's singing, and his reference to the existing inanities of the lyric stage. There was, however, a look in his eyes which he could not conceal while he made a few airy remarks on the subject of Mrs. Harvey's cookery—a glow of sincerity which both the girls appreciated.

He thought it necessary to say at considerable length how charming was Miss Joan's vocalism: people write columns about a picture that is bought under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest. But a very few words were sufficient for Mrs. Harvey: people do not enter into the details of the Madonna dei Ansidei.

He was delighted to stay to dinner.

CHAPTER VII

IT was a week later when the two girls called upon Mr. Vickers at his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. They had made an excuse to pay a visit of a few days to an aunt whose name was Lady Humber—the widow of an insignificant general who had worked all his life to be made the Governor of Calapash Island and had died through surprise at his success. She had a tiny house in a locality that only missed by a hair's breadth being regarded as fashionable. As a matter of fact there were thousands of moderately well-informed people in London who honestly believed that the locality was fashionable, and the house-agents strained every nerve to perpetuate the fiction.

The house was too tiny to admit of a larger dog than a Japanese spaniel or a Pomeranian being the companion of Lady Humber. But she had one specimen of each of these animals, and she chose them of the darkest colour available, so as to minimize their size. Joan made up a story about the ceiling of the dining-room being so low that it was impossible to have anything but soles for dinner,

and that so soon as a kitten grew to be a cat it was banished from the house. She herself acquired a stoop after a week's visit to her aunt, she affirmed ; and it remained with her for days afterwards. But then Joan was nearly as tall as her father—and he was one inch over six feet ; and the dining-room ceiling at Selwood was thirty feet high.

Mr. Vickers was surprised by the two young women, whose names had been sent up to him by the elderly clerk who had never told a lie. (He would have found himself greatly out of place in most offices.) He felt that they had come to make some revelation to him, and he had no means of neutralising its effect by previous inquiries.

But he was pleased to see them, and recovered himself sufficiently to be able to ask if their father was well.

Muriel reassured him on this point, and then the girls heliographed to one another.

After a decently disjunctive pause, Muriel said :

"Mr. Vickers, we have come to you without our father's knowledge. But you won't mind that, I am sure."

Mr. Vickers did not commit himself to any opinion on this point. He looked from one girl to the other, and the tip of his pen on the edge of his desk plainly said in the vernacular,

"That is as may be."

"We thought it better to come to you to ask you to tell us just how we stand," continued Muriel.

"I fear that you haven't much hope of being able to let Selwood."

"One can never tell," said he. "There may be some one—people get rich very quickly nowadays ; and then—then——"

"Then there are always fools, you would say, Mr. Vickers. I see plainly that you place all your hopes upon the fools," said Joan. "I don't say that you are wrong," she added in a conciliatory way.

"What we are most anxious to know is, what have we got to live on if Selwood remains unlet ?" said Muriel, coming to the point with a suddenness that startled Mr. Vickers. They were indeed masterful girls.

There was certainly no danger of his startling them in the same way. He made faces. He raised his eyebrows, until his forehead was wrinkled laterally, then he lowered them until the wrinkles were perpendicular.

"My dear Miss Selwood," he said at last, "these little matters can always be made easy in the case of a great house and a great—a once great property. The present income of the estate is sufficient—at least very nearly sufficient to pay the interest on the mortgages and to maintain the place. Happily your brother is not extravagant. He is greatly interested in his work. Should war break out, and I fear that nothing can avert that calamity, he will be on the spot."

"That's quite true, indeed," said Joan. "Then we

can pull through for a year or two, by the aid of judicious borrowing, Mr. Vickers?"

"Without the least difficulty; trust to me to look after that," said the lawyer.

"We do trust to you implicitly, Mr. Vickers," cried Joan. "We did not like to worry our father. We knew that you would tell us all we wanted to know. You have made our minds quite easy; we know now that we can live for some years if we can only borrow enough money for the purpose."

"You have quite reassured us, Mr. Vickers," said Muriel.

Mr. Vickers said how pleased he felt, and he hoped that Lady Humber was well, and added that he had already approached some of the most influential agents on the question of letting Selwood. The agents took his view of the matter: they were by no means despondent.

"No one who has any confidence in the supply of fools—and I suppose that people who succeed in letting big properties have a large experience in that way—can be wholly despondent in such matters," said Joan, and Mr. Vickers looked at her narrowly. He wondered if she added satire to her other resources of masterfulness.

"I thought as much," said Muriel when she was by her sister's side in Lady Humber's brougham. "We were not mistaken. We are something more than beggars."

"And the more we borrow now the more we shall

have to pay some day," said Joan, who was but imperfectly acquainted with the ethics of borrowing.

"And the worst of it is that it will all fall on poor old Smeaton's shoulders."

Smeaton was their only brother, a subaltern of Gunners moving about from one vague station to another in the colony of Natal.

"Yes, that's the worst of it," acquiesced Joan. "We are only girls. What right have we to go on spending his money?"

That was the question which these two nineteenth-century girls put to themselves, feeling that it could be answered in one way only. The reflection that they were eating and drinking and dressing at the expense of their brother was terrible to them. They felt that they had no rights as daughters of the house of Selwood—that they had scarcely a right to sleep in two of the forty-odd bedrooms at Selwood. Only by reducing themselves in thought to the level of caretakers could they reconcile themselves to the position which they occupied. Let the severest censors say what they pleased, the house must have caretakers, to prevent its falling into ruin; and they knew that they discharged the duties of caretakers as well and as economically as the cheapest of house-keepers. They were hard on neither the coals nor the candles.

It was a sincere satisfaction for Muriel, on their return to Selwood, after a week of thoughtful depression in London, to read her book by the sullen flicker

of the log in the grate, in order to save the expense of a lamp, and for Joan to blow out one of the two candles that had been lighted when she was going to play on her piano. This was real saving, each of them felt, and on moonlight nights they went to bed without the aid of any artificial illuminant, when they had sent away their maid (£60 a year and perquisites) to her own room. The maid read French novels in bed every night by the assistance of a couple of candles.

Colonel Selwood now and again became aware of these acts of genuine economy and was greatly annoyed at them, refusing to accept the falsehoods, however plausible, which the girls invented to account for the things that he saw. Any cheeseparings was irritating to him, and he could only restore his wounded *amour propre* by spending money upon something that was quite unnecessary. Then the girls looked at each other sadly. It was so like a man, they said, to resent a laudable saving.

And then they began to plot things together, and to order things from the tradesmen by postcard instead of by letter. They exhorted each other to be firm.

"We have set our hands to the plough, dear," said Muriel. "No matter what happens, we shall not look back."

"Never, never," Joan responded firmly. "We may only be girls, but we are no longer children. Our lives are our own. We shall do what we know to be right, for the poor boy's sake."

They felt almost as happy as martyrs. Still, when one of them read in the household column of a ladies' paper that excellent oyster sauce could be made out of tinned oysters, the aggregate boldness of the two was not sufficient to carry either of them into the presence of the housekeeper to make the suggestion that in future the cuisine of Selwood should be conducted on the soldered can system. Their courage had its limitations.

And then one morning Muriel got a letter which was signed "Chris," and she announced to her father and her sister that Chris Foxcroft was coming down for a Saturday-to-Monday visit to the Rectory, and hoped he might drop in to lunch at Selwood on Sunday.

"I shall be glad of a chat with him about this war business," said Colonel Selwood. "I fear that the Government are going to bungle the matter, as usual."

At that time President Kruger had not sent his ultimatum to Her Majesty's Government—that document which turned out to be the last articulate expression of his Republic.

"Chris says something about the likelihood of war," said Muriel, glancing down the letter. "Yes, he says it's all settled, and we are going to send fifty thousand men to knock the tall hat of Mr. Kruger into the Tugela."

"Fifty thousand men," growled Colonel Selwood. "What do they want with fifty thousand men?"

Smeaton is in luck. His battery is certain to be sent to the front. They'll need every available gun if they are to hold their own in Natal. I shouldn't wonder if those Transvaalers had some comparatively modern guns, they are so sly. Oh yes, Smeaton is in luck."

The girls were not quite so sure about the luck. The luck of being sent with a small force to hold in check a large force is not invariably apparent to the womenfolk of the men who are under such orders. And it was really only in a very half-hearted way that Muriel said,

"Oh yes, Smeaton is very lucky."

"Yes ; I hope he will be lucky," said Joan enigmatically.

She thought that her wish was about to be granted when in one of the newspapers which arrived, she read the opinion of an expert, which was to the effect that President Kruger would crawl down at the first sign of military preparations on the part of England.

But this was the paper that irritated her father most, because it contained the opinion which he felt to be the most plausible.

"They may as well fight now as again," he growled. "If there's to be a constant patching up of peace, South Africa will fall to pieces between their peaces."

This grim play upon the words his daughters interpreted as the result of nervousness. They

wondered whether it was the possibility of peace or the possibility of war that affected his nerves.

They knew which of the two it was that affected their own nerves. The healthy instinct of the woman to adore the fighting man has not yet, thank Heaven, been crushed out by civilisation, but it is not the less healthy because it is accompanied by an abhorrence of a fight.

"Chris will be able to tell us enough," said Joan. "Dear old Chris! Was there ever a time when he was unable to tell us everything?"

"We must pray that the pater does not capture him and keep him from us all day," said Muriel.

"We shall have to plot," said Joan sagely.

They had been doing a good deal in this way already, but they had not yet become expert in the service. When two girls have lived, the one to the age of twenty-four, and the other to the age of twenty-two and a half, without finding it necessary for their own protection to adopt a course of dissimulation, it is not surprising that they should fail to show any considerable dexterity when they begin to practise it all at once.

But they had great hopes that Chris Foxcroft would be able to put them up to a trick or two; their hopes being founded on the fact that Chris was in intimate association with a great London daily newspaper. They did not know very much of the world, but they rather guessed that a hint or two on the Best Way of Not being Found Out could be

given to them by a man who had mastered the working of a London newspaper.

Their friend Chris Foxcroft was the eldest son of the Rector of Husbandman's Selwood, and having been brought up with the most scrupulous care, he had naturally turned out a rebel. His father had told him at a very early age that his vocation in life was the Church, and he had at that very age accepted his father's decree without murmuring. The only time when he felt that the Church as a vocation was not enough for him—that there was a larger and a fuller life for a man than was to be found within its precincts—was upon the occasion of a visit which he paid to London at the age of ten. On his return to the Rectory he told his father that he had a conviction that he was unfitted for the duties of the ministry. He felt deeply that his vocation was to be the man who looks after the dogs outside the Army and Navy Stores.

When his father pointed out to him that to attain to a position of so great distinction involved his taking part in many campaigns and wearing many medals on his breast, he said he had no objection to go through any number of fights if only he could be sure of so glorious a goal at the last.

But he had an alternative scheme in his mind. If he could not become a commissionaire in charge of dogs, he would like to become the man who runs after cabs with luggage on the roof. His eyes sparkled as he spoke of those sprinters whom he had

observed and envied, especially when he became aware of the extent of their emoluments for what, after all, was more exciting than a paper chase.

When his father explained to him that the best training for the duties of this precarious profession was a course of athletics at a University, he consented to resume his studies with a view to fit himself for the calling which he had chosen. His father thought that he could not begin too soon to study the works of Demosthenes and Cicero, both masters of the art of vituperation.

It was when he was fifteen that he wanted to be a professional cricketer. Could there be a higher ideal in life than playing cricket all day and drawing thirty shillings a week from the club for doing it? He thought not.

At sixteen he made up his mind to become a poet ; and he became one.

The man who becomes a poet at sixteen becomes a prig at seventeen, and it was when he reached the prig stage that his father began to feel that his son was a genius. He was not quite so confident on this point when his son was sent down in his second year at the University, the offence being a literary one. Most people outside the University and Rectory had no difficulty in perceiving that to be the author of the verses published in the Undergraduates' Magazine, dealing somewhat trenchantly with the personal habits of the Heads of the College, was a

far greater achievement than to obtain the highest degree possible to be conferred by the University.

The Rector of Husbandman's Selwood, however, thought otherwise. He actually preached a sermon on the text "O Absalom, my son, my son!"

He had no difficulty in finding a parallel to the striking incident in the history of the Jewish Sultan ; and the two long-legged little girls sitting in the Selwood pew, felt an enormous admiration for Chris, the Rector's son, who was said to be as wicked a boy as Absalom, besides being twice as manly, for Chris's hair was closely cropped. They thought a boy with long hair must have been molly-coddled. They were sure that Absalom's mother molly-coddled him, or was it his step-mother—one of his step-mothers?—for by dint of puzzling out the matter in their uninformed brains, and in spite of the feminine interpretation of mysterious words and phrases, they came to the conclusion that Absalom must have had in average years between ten and twelve thousand step-mothers.

And then, to their amazement, they found their father—he was a captain on the staff of General Uppingham in those days, and only came to Selwood for a month now and then—taking the part of the wicked Chris against the Rector ; affirming that Chris hadn't much the matter with him, and that he was white to the backbone—a phrase which was enigmatical in its assertion of the obvious, but, on the whole, comforting to them.

They asked their governess many questions about Chris and his evil ways, and she told them that she was afraid that he was an infidel. They demanded an explanation of what it was to be an infidel, and she gave them her definition of an infidel.

The next day her two young charges came to her in tears. They thought it only right to make a clean breast of what was their trouble. The fact was that they were both infidels, they affirmed

CHAPTER VIII

CHRIS had gone back to Oxford when the term of his suspension expired, and later on there came the rumour of his having gained one of the great prizes of his college—taking his degree—a prize that amounted to a sum of money paid to him every year for some time.

His father preached the next Sunday from the text, "My son, which was lost and is found," and he took care to lay all the emphasis upon the finding, glossing over the prodigality episodes with a light touch.

One of the girls was now sixteen and the other fourteen and a half; and they were both treated with extraordinary deference and respect by Chris, when he came to lunch with their father. Unlike every one whom they had yet met, he assumed that they were capable of forming opinions upon various matters, and that their views were worth listening to.

He agreed with what Muriel said about Tennyson, and ventured to suggest that Matthew Arnold might be worthy of her consideration. He promised to send her two volumes of Matthew Arnold in the morning, and he kept his promise. He heard Joan

sing, and did not hesitate to affirm that she sang as if she knew that singing was worthless as a medium of emotional expression unless it went deeper than the poet could go.

Both the girls knew far better than he did what he meant.

And a few days afterwards he told his father that he was going out to see the world for a while. No one who did not know the world thoroughly—especially its wickedness—could be a good parson, he said.

“When I have had a look in at the world and the flesh and the devil, I may come back and preach against them with proper zeal, but just now, from all I have heard about them, I sympathise with all three.”

His father denounced him till three in the morning, and told him that he must no longer regard the Rectory as his home. The Rector had another son, and he gave Chris to understand that if he chose to behave as Esau, he, his father, had no alternative but to treat his brother as Jacob.

For two years nothing was heard of Chris, and then there came a rumour that he was writing for some paper. Later on, among the contents of a box of books from the library, Muriel found a novel with the name Christopher Wakefield Foxcroft on the title-page, and both she and her sister read it from cover to cover one breathless day. They thought it delightful; and it seemed that a good many other people did the like, for the story was

a distinct success—not a brilliant success, but still not so indifferent a one as to compel the precious among critics to pronounce it an epoch-making book. According to the precious ones there are on an average four epochs in every year, and each is marked by the publication of a singularly tiresome novel.

The Rector, having read a criticism in *The Times* upon the book, wrote a letter of remonstrance to his son Esau (addressed in care of the publishers). He wished to know if his son thought it dutiful on his part to pay no visit to his home during a space of two years, etc., etc.

Chris got the letter, and, recalling the words with which his father had sent him forth into the world, smiled ; but having learned something of the world since that day, he did not respond reminding his father of these words ; no, his knowledge of the world had made him very tolerant even of his own relations ; so he wrote a beautiful penitent letter to the Rectory, and expressed the hope that the following week would be convenient to his father to receive him.

He went to the Rectory and saw his father. The meeting between the father and the prodigal who returns, not prostrated by gastritis due to a prolonged diet of husks, but with a healthy appetite and the upright gait of the man who has succeeded, has yet to be described. It may be taken for granted that no references are made on either side to the parting of long ago, and that the reproaches of the

father on account of his son's negligence in not writing home to give the details of his success are tempered by paternal affection, so that they cannot possibly wound the susceptibilities of the son. And then the story of how the prodigal "got on" is listened to in all its particulars, until the father's face begins to beam, and there are tears in his eyes, as he stretches his hand out to the boy, and tells him that he is proud of him.

"You must not forget to look up the Selwoods," said the father on the day after his son's return, whereat the son laughed quietly and said,

"Oh yes ; of course. I suppose the Selwoods are still at the old place?"

He did not think it necessary to acquaint his father with the fact that he had kept up his acquaintance with the Selwoods or that he had had an opportunity of recommending other books to Muriel than the works of Matthew Arnold. It so happened, however, that Colonel Selwood had come across Chris in Egypt, whither the latter had gone as a special correspondent for the newspaper for which he had been writing for some time ; and on their return, Colonel Selwood had invited him to his town house. Here Chris found the two girls, whom he had never forgotten, passing from a beautiful girlhood into beautiful womanhood.

Thus it was that he had had many opportunities of calling Muriel's attention to those works in prose and verse which had influenced him since he had

left the University and had begun to educate himself. Of course, it was understood that Joan would not be precluded from these half-hours with his favourite authors, but it was to Muriel he had communicated his views on books and other matters of less incidental interest to both of them.

And then there came a day—it was nearly a year after Chris's return—when Muriel received a proposal of marriage from a man whom most people regarded as a highly eligible suitor. She refused the man, and then Chris had a chat with her in a pleasantly aloof corner of a very large drawing-room where they met.

Joan had her eyes upon them, and when they arrived home, she said,

“I saw you with Chris.”

“Yes,” said Muriel, “and we understand each other.”

“Then that's all right,” cried Joan; and from that day, which was close upon two years before the girls had paid that surprise visit to Mr. Vickers, Joan had never asked her sister what were the exact elements of the understanding that existed between her and Chris Foxcroft.

She was not without imagination, however. It was Chris himself who had told her that the great charm of her singing was the amount of imagination with which her rendering of every theme was coloured.

And now these two masterful young women were laying their heads together with a view to the best way of consulting that masterful young man on a

matter which they believed to concern the family of Selwood very closely.

It was only to be expected that Colonel Selwood should get hold of him on the way from church—the girls had assumed so much ; for Chris's connection with the great newspaper permitted of his speaking with authority on all points relating to the possible war, and, in fact, to every other topic that could possibly come up for consideration. The colonel did get hold of him, and learned on his way home from church more of the secret thoughts of every member of the Cabinet in regard to South Africa than he could have gained from all the guide-books to the Cabinet yet published.

Chris knew exactly how far every Minister was prepared to go. He could have marked off with little flags and pins on a map of South Africa, the limits of the march of every individual Minister. Two of them meant to carry the Union Jack to the market-place at Pretoria, he said ; but the others would not go farther than Majuba on the Natal side ; and there was actually one feeble fellow who had so great a dread of European intervention that, if he had his own way, he would have the halliards of the flag which* was flying over Government House at Cape Town, connected by electricity with a certain office in London, so that at a moment's notice it could be lowered, for fear of wounding the susceptibilities of some people on the other side of the Channel. There were some people so

artistically sensitive that they became ill every time they saw that chromatic blend which was called the Union Jack.

Everything depended on the feeling of the country, Chris declared ; and for himself, he had no fear for the country. The country would vote solid for Pretoria, as the spot on the map where the pin bearing the flag must be planted. (It seemed that Chris knew all about the country as well as the Cabinet and the Continent and President Kruger.)

"The music halls are sounding the first note of the trumpet," said he, laughing. "And what the music halls think to-day, all England will think to-morrow. The only infallible guide to truth is the music hall."

"I hope that the campaign will not be controlled from Leicester Square," said Colonel Selwood.

"And why not ?" cried Chris, with a fine inflection of irony.

"I've heard of campaigns conducted from Fleet Street before now," said the colonel, smiling ; "so why not from Leicester Square ?"

"Why not, indeed ?" said Chris. "Would you drag the War Office into the business? Good heavens! One must be at the end of one's resources when one drags the poor old War Office into the quarrel!"

(It seemed that Chris knew all about the War Office as well as the music halls and the newspapers.)

"I know that you are doing your best to bring about the war," said Joan. "You want to go out

again as war correspondent for that dreadful paper of yours."

He found it impossible to suppress the little flush which ran over his face ; and both the girls laughed. He, too, laughed a moment later ; but then, recovering himself, he said with an affectation of dignity,

"My dear young lady, I would not think it right to complicate an already difficult question of international politics by obtruding my own personality into it. Mr. Kruger need fear no more than Mr. Chamberlain that I shall ever insist on a campaign, simply to give myself a chance. Still, if there is to be a campaign—well, I think it likely that I shall be where it is going on."

"Would to Heaven that I had it in my power to say that I shall be where it is going on," said the colonel, making a savage cut at a protruding twig of a chestnut from one of the trees of the avenue—they had reached the Selwood avenue of chestnuts. "Fifty-three, and practically shelved, Chris! Only a looker-on until I die, and I may not die till I am eighty-five. Who on earth would be a soldier?"

"In a few months' time the cry throughout the country may be, 'Who on earth would be anything but a soldier?'" said Chris.

"In a few months?" said the colonel. "Do you mean to suggest that the war, if there is a war, will last over a fortnight?"

"We have got a report from a correspondent at Pretoria which makes me think that it may last

for six months ; and that a hundred thousand men will not be too many to have at the Cape to do the work that will have to be done."

"Your correspondent should try his hand at a novel," laughed Colonel Selwood. "A novel—or a prospectus—or some other form of imaginative literature. A hundred thousand men! I wonder where the ships are to come from to carry even fifty thousand out to the Cape?"

Chris took a long piece of paper from his breast pocket. It was printed down the centre, and the broad white margin bore hieroglyphics boldly executed with a pen.

"There's a list of the ships," he said. "It's the proof of something that's to appear in my paper. I took the opportunity of making some corrections on it during my father's sermon."

"The catalogue of the ships—that sounds quite Homeric, doesn't it?" said Muriel, while her father looked at the paper with wide eyes.

"Homeric—yes ; that's the name for it," said Chris. "And the business that's before us is Homeric also ; the campaign will not be a parade to Pretoria. It will be epic—unless our correspondent's a fool."

"Which, as Euclid says, would be absurd, seeing that he is a correspondent for the *Morning's Wing*," said Joan.

The *Morning's Wing* was the paper on whose pinions Chris Foxcroft was being wafted to fame, though he called it a competency.

CHAPTER IX

IT was after lunch when Chris found himself at last alone with Muriel and Joan. Their father had been talking quite excitedly during the first half of the lunch, and quite depressedly during the other half. It was all about the war and its possibilities—its probabilities—that he had been talking. He was as excited as a subaltern over his first campaign—as excited as if he were about to have a command.

Then suddenly he paused and said that he was an old man.

Chris laughed at the very notion of it, and then the colonel laughed until he became depressed and silent.

"Your father has gone to eat his heart out in the library," said Chris when the colonel had disappeared. "I don't think that I showed much tact in beginning to talk about this Kriegspiel that's likely to come on. He is longing to be in the thick of it."

"Every one else who has ever carried a sword is doing the same," said Muriel. "You are longing to be in the thick of it yourself; and you have never carried a sword."

"I am—I am—truer words were never spoken,"

said Chris. "It's as natural for a healthy man to want to be near the centre of a fight as it is for him to want to be near a joint of red meat when he is hungry. I hope I'll have my chance of getting near the centre of this South African business. I hope my people will not keep me at home to abuse the War Office. Of course the War Office will have to be abused whatever happens."

Then Muriel looked up from the mongrel Jimmy, to whom she was vainly trying to teach a biscuit trick, and met Joan's eye. Joan nodded to her.

"Chris," said Muriel, "we want you very badly to help us. We have come to the end of our resources here and we must make some money—Joan and I—so we want you to tell us, as you know most things, how do women make money?"

Chris looked from one girl to the other. He was a little startled, but he had no inclination to treat this question with levity. Every day it was impressed upon him that he was living at the very end of the century and not at its beginning. The novelists of the first half of the century were accustomed to make most of their humorous points by turning womankind into a kind of Aunt Sally and shying missiles at it. Maidenhood, if it extended beyond a certain period, widowhood, maternity, and, above all, mother-in-lawhood were, he knew, the subject of the dainty ridicule of the great writers of the forties and the fifties. These sympathetic artists became maudlin over a lame boy,

but hilarious over a maiden lady with short sight. Above all they had a contempt for the woman who wanted to work.

Chris Foxcroft was not inclined to levity when he heard Muriel's question.

"Women make money just as men make money: by working for it," said he. "The only trouble is that so many fancy they can do it too easily. None of them are afraid to work, but they think that they should be exempted from the work of learning how to work."

"That's the worst of it," said Joan. "Most women are, I suppose, like ourselves: we cannot afford the time for an apprenticeship."

"That's just it," said he. "Because a few women can make a living by writing novels before they have learned how to write, a hundred women sit down with a ream of letter paper before them and are overwhelmed with disappointment when it is impressed upon them that they have written what no publisher will pay them anything for. Good heavens! it took me eight years learning to be a journalist, and I haven't yet succeeded in making myself indispensable to a newspaper; as for books—as for books—the profits of the three which I have written wouldn't keep me for a year, though they were all successful in their way."

"We are not thinking of writing books," said Joan.

"But we want you to continue telling us everything you know," said Muriel.

"Every woman whom I meet in London wants me to help her to become what she calls a journalist," said Chris. "When I suggest the five years' system of apprenticeship she says that of course it is quite natural that men should throw every obstacle in the way of a poor woman. You see they all want ten pounds a week to start with. It is well known that the *Morning's Wing* pays one particular woman ten pounds a week for a column of news, but then she can say at a moment's notice where every member of the aristocracy—the newspaper aristocracy—is at a given hour. We have daily applications from ladies who offer to do the same work for a pound a week less. 'Can you do it as well?' the manager editor asks them. They smile. 'As well? Oh, surely as well, perhaps better.' 'Indeed!' he says. 'What was the name of the second wife of Lady Owen Glendower's youngest daughter's husband—and what was his nickname?' They stare for a while and then go away crushed."

"We don't want to become journalists," said Muriel.

"But you could—with training. I've heard that there's money to be made over bonnets. The bonnet shop business carries the title of Madame with it, after the manner of an Italian estate. Then there's a tea shop—it doesn't matter how cold your hot tea cakes are if you are the daughters of an admiral. What about flowers? I know two girls who go

round decorating dinner-tables and make enough to keep them in comfort. Of course there's the stage—only just now there are about three hundred excellent actresses out of work ; and besides——”

“ Oh, yes—besides,” said Muriel.

“ Yes, of course, there's the apprenticeship again. It is horrid,” assented Chris. “ Well, I could tell you of a dozen or so other ways by which women keep themselves and their idle fathers—more frequently their idle husbands—quite comfortably ; the fact is that I went into the subject thoroughly and wrote a good many articles about it, but——”

“ But ? ” queried Muriel.

“ Yes ; I am just thinking what is your stock-in-trade. You have a voice, Joan, and a real voice should be a fortune to any girl.”

“ I am mindful of my voice,” said Joan. “ I know what I can do with it. It is never thin, it is never reedy, it is never uncertain, but I can never express with it just what I set out with the intention of expressing. My voice never carries me away.”

“ That's a good sign,” said Chris. “ Your aim should be to move your hearers. You have never sung before a couple of thousand people—everyday people—people who are willing to pay a couple of shillings in order to be taken out of their commonplace world into one of sunlight and emotion—perhaps even passion.”

“ Never—never—I have never sung when there was any one near me to care whether I was singing

or not. How many girls sing under other conditions!" cried Joan. "And now that you have told me what would be expected of me, I never want to sing except in a drawing-room—a drawling-room, you have called it. The people who drawl are not the people who want to be carried away to another and a lovelier world."

"I should like to have you tried," said Chris, with a sudden critical air. "It is as likely as not that you may become a great singer. I wish I knew more of how one is brought before the public. You have already served an apprenticeship—in a sense. You have been taught all that can be taught of the science of singing."

"I am becoming more afraid every moment you continue speaking. Turn your attention to Muriel," said Joan.

"What is your stock-in-trade, Muriel?" said he.

"I could write a book on old tapestry," said Muriel.

"You will have to rest content with the consciousness that you could write it; you must not write it," said he. "Still, thousands of pounds are made every year by buying and selling tapestries. I quite forgot for the moment in what direction your particular hobby was to be found."

"I reminded you of it as a jest," said Muriel. "I suppose that the people who buy and sell old tapestries from year's end to year's end know far more about it than I do."

"All knowledge is an asset," said he. "You know all about tapestry and furniture—furniture in its relation to what people call 'periods,' do you not?"

"I fancy I know a good deal—but there, again, I may know nothing in comparison with people who make it their business."

"That's no reason why you shouldn't make it your business. You may learn more as you go on—yes, at a trifling cost, I hope."

"I was not thinking of going into the furniture business," laughed Muriel. "What was on my mind was painting."

He shook his head.

"My dear girl," said he, "I know something about painting pictures as a trade. I am acquainted with a good many painters. Don't place any dependence on what you can do in that way. You can paint, I know. You have fancy and feeling—a certain dainty feeling like Watteau or Boucher, and you can make your subjects as graceful as you please—but to sell pictures. . . . The only men who can do more than merely keep themselves alive are the black and white men—about a dozen of them do very well—and the men who design posters. You would not care to set yourself down to study working on stone so as to reproduce in colour with the fewest possible printings."

"That is where a second apprenticeship would be needed," said Muriel. Then she turned to Joan.

"I'm afraid, my dear," she said, "we haven't enough stock between us to furnish the humblest shop. We are just as helpless as any other girls—perhaps we are more so. We may take to writing columns on dress, or, perhaps, we may even seek to prove how far reduced we are, by writing a novel or two."

"What's the matter with confectionery?" said Joan. "Surely we might be able to do something in a confectionery business—a corner shop. Or *Tit-Bits*—couldn't we make something out of the widespread taste for pure literature by selling penny magazines?"

"Don't go away with the notion that you are at the end of your resources," said he. "The thing requires a lot of thinking out, and we haven't done more than begun to consider it. I know what people want in any business—writing—printing—journalism—greengrocery. In every department of art the people are longing for something new. Do you fancy that any one would have read the diatribes of Carlyle if they had been written in English? But it was new. That witches' broth style of his—that scum of the brose kettle flavoured by the rinsing of the porridge pot—had a certain dreadful fascination about it for a good many people, simply because it had never been offered to them before. Haven't you had instances of the same thing in painting—and music? Who listens to anything except Wagner nowadays?"

"Go on to the greengrocers," said Joan.

"I'll take journalism on my way," said he. "Yes, the men who were clever enough to know that all the millions spent on the education of the masses must have some effect, and who were intelligent enough to provide *Tit-Bits*, *Answers*, and other dainties to meet the imperative demand for real literature, made their fortunes, and deserved to do so."

"But the greengrocers?" suggested Muriel.

"That greengrocer who was the first to import the banana retired in affluence because he saw that the orange had had its day. These are instances enough for us, my children. I myself have just written a book which is so new that I cannot find a publisher to take it; but it will make my fortune—the publishers may also make a trifle out of it. But it doesn't matter about me: I want to hit upon something new for both of you—some new field for you to exploit. By the way, what does the Colonel say to your notion?"

"He has said nothing—for the best of reasons—up to the present," replied Muriel.

"You haven't told him what you have in your mind?"

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"We thought that on the whole it would be better to say nothing to him just yet," said Muriel. "Joan and I talked it all over together, and we came to the conclusion that this is a thing which concerns ourselves only."

"You see, we're no chickens," interposed Joan. "We don't see why, because we happen to be girls, we should not be permitted to do something for ourselves."

"I don't see it either; that is probably because I am very nearly as modern as you are—I am almost as closely in touch with the spirit of the time. Depend upon it we are not drifting; we are being properly steered. The time was when girls were forced to drift: they were compelled to live in complete ignorance of the world and its ways, and any useful work was tabooed so far as they were concerned. The poor things were forced to put their souls into samplers, and their energies into embroidery—all useless—worse than useless—but genteel—eminently genteel. The one thing that fathers and mothers would not tolerate in the daughters of that day was idleness; but the only work which they allowed them to do was worse than idleness."

"That is why we are all so helpless to-day," cried Joan. "And that is why we are compelled to practise duplicity and to hide our intentions from our father."

"But we have a sense of our individuality and our individual responsibilities," cried Muriel. "We have no desire to have all our personality merged in the Selwood family. We have no desire to be indoor paupers, supported by the unwilling contributions of the people who lend money on mortgages. We feel that it is not merely the land which is being

mortgaged: the mortgage is on our own self-respect. You understand us, Chris, don't you?"

"I understand you, and to understand you is to love you," said he. "I will stand by you. I will see you through this business—trust to me, I will see you through."

Each of them caught the hand which he held out; and neither of them had let go the hand she held when a servant entered with a telegram for Mr. Foxcroft.

"I thought it was impossible to get a telegram here on a Sunday," said Joan.

"I arranged to have anything important forwarded by messenger from Lessingham to the Rectory," said he, tearing open the cover, with a word of apology.

He glanced from line to line of the despatch.

"Hurrah!" he said. "It's done. The ultimatum is not from Chamberlain to Kruger, but from Kruger to Chamberlain. It is impudence itself, and amounts to a declaration of war."

"You will have your chance as a correspondent," said Muriel, in a low voice, and with a pale face.

"I shall be at the front within a month; the job was promised to me," he cried, and his face was flushed, his fingers crushing the telegram.

"You will see the British Empire through this business?" said Joan. "It is the Empire that you will have to stand by."

He looked from one girl to the other, and then Colonel Selwood entered the room.

CHAPTER X

CHRIS FOXCROFT had a good deal to think about on his way back to town, and the conditions under which he travelled were very helpful for the working out of any question that required deliberation of thought. The Sunday mail train which passed through the village was eminently deliberate. It did not encourage any precipitancy on the part of the four passengers whom it had dredged up from the depths of the valley of the Saale. It might have been designed by the management to give travellers an opportunity of comparing the stationmasters' tastes in gardening all along the line, for no wayside hamlet was too insignificant to be visited by the Sunday mail.

The gardens certainly looked very neat in the lamplight.

He had looked forward to the declaration of war with eagerness during the months when war seemed probable. He had travelled through the Transvaal and along its borders a couple of years before, and had written article after article for the *Morning's Wing*, exploiting and explaining the situation. He had thus come to be looked on as one of the leading

experts in regard to the Transvaal question, and it was assumed that, should there be a war in South Africa, he would be asked to represent the *Morning's Wing* as special correspondent. No secret had been made of the intentions of the management in this matter, and he had consequently gone to pay the visit to his father, and, incidentally, to Selwood, in the high spirits of the man who feels that, after waiting for his chance, it is about to be offered him. His only misgiving was in regard to the possibility of the misunderstanding being smoothed away by diplomacy.

But a sagacious colleague of his had reassured him on this point.

"Diplomacy," he had said—"I'll tell you what diplomacy is—diplomacy is the last resource of the poltroon. It is only effectual when both the parties are afraid to strike."

Knowing that Mr. Kruger was not afraid, and being assured that Mr. Chamberlain had no fear, Chris was reassured, and had gone down to the country with a light heart. He had been so light-hearted—so certain that his chance was about to come—that he had reddened when one of the girls had shown that she knew him to be anxious for a fight. He had to confess by that flush of his that he was anxious for the war to break out and send him to the front.

And yet now he was returning to London, feeling that so far as he was concerned, there was to be

no war. He had an impression that Mr. Kruger had apologised to Mr. Chamberlain—or was it Mr. Chamberlain who had apologised to Mr. Kruger?—anyhow, there was not going to be war. It was not the British Empire that he was going to see through the business, but an infinitely more important entity.

It was long past midnight when the leisurely train carried him into the London terminus—even Sunday mail trains arrive at their destinations at last! He drove at once to the office of *Morning's Wing*, and hastened to the room of the managing editor, but found that that official had gone home. Without waiting to meet any of his colleagues on the editorial staff, he entered his own room. He sat for a long time in front of his desk in the darkness and the solitude before switching on the light, hearing the faint sound of voices of people in the other rooms off the corridor. He knew that they were discussing the question as to the member of the staff who was to do his work when he should have gone to the Cape.

"I can do it—I think I can do it," he said, as he switched on his light.

There it lay before him on his desk—the letter which he expected—the letter from the managing editor, telling him that the proprietor of *Morning's Wing* was desirous of hearing from him if he would care to go out to the Cape as war correspondent for his paper.

The letter was written in that friendly spirit

which left it optional with the receiver to go or to remain.

Without a moment's hesitation he took a sheet of paper from the case in front of him and wrote respectfully declining the flattering offer, and hoping that he would have an opportunity of explaining to the proprietor his reasons for doing so.

While he was wondering what reasons he could bring forward that would strike the critical ear of the proprietor as moderately plausible, his door was knocked at, and there entered a certain Mr. Forrester, the graphic writer who had acted as war correspondent for the *Trumpeter* during the Nile relief expedition.

"Hallo!" said Chris, "what brings you here at this hour of the night?"

"Business, my lad," replied the veteran. "I heard that you were returning to-night, and I waited to see you on a matter—a matter of business."

"I'm here," said Chris. "That train—seventy minutes late."

"Only seventy minutes? By the Lord Harry, the new management that was to reform all the abuses of the service has done wonders if the train was only seventy minutes late! But I didn't keep out of bed for the sake of going over the long list of grievances against that line. No, I have come to you on a rather queer errand. I don't think that I could bring myself up to the point of going

to any one but yourself in this way, Foxcroft ; but—I want you to do me a good turn—a particularly good turn.”

“That’s an easy matter,” said Chris. “It so happens that I owe you a good turn—you did something for me in the Soudan that I am not likely to forget.”

“I have forgotten it,” said the veteran ; “and I don’t want you to remember it now ; but—well, what I want of you is to say a good word for me with your people here. It would suit me to go out for them to the Cape—it would suit me very well ; and I fancy that if you were to rub me in—always assuming, of course, that you haven’t set your heart on the job yourself——”

“I have set my heart on—on quite another job,” said Chris. “I may tell you in confidence that Mr. Meadows has been good enough to give me the option of going on the war path, but I have been compelled to decline it.”

“Great Nicholas ! You have refused the job ? Look here, Foxcroft, will you look me straight in the face and tell me that you refused the job before I entered this room. If you fancy that I would accept such a sacrifice. . . . I know what a good chap you are, but, by— Look me straight in the face and give me your word that——”

“I needn’t put myself to the trouble of making a solemn affirmation on this point,” said Chris. “You take that letter, which you will admit I wrote

before you came into this room—tear open the cover and read it, and you will see that I have asked leave to stay at home—to stay at home like a coward while you chaps are in the thick of the racket.”¹

The man took the letter mechanically, but his eyes were upon Chris's face—and he saw that Chris's face had a smile of woe upon it—he saw that it was the face of a man who has just been through a fight, and who cannot trust himself very far to speak about it.

He laid the letter unopened upon the desk, and stretched out his hand to the younger man.

“It's a girl!” said the veteran. “A girl has asked you to stay at home, and you are going to do it. I see it, my lad, I see it all as plain as if you had told me with your lips instead of with your eyes. Confound her!—I mean, God bless her! God bless her! . . . A coward?—coward? . . . Chris Foxcroft, you are the bravest man I ever met. Only it was a sign of weakness for you to say that word ‘coward.’ Do you really believe in your heart that any one will think for the fraction of a second that you—you——”

“God help me! I don't know whether I am doing right or wrong,” said Chris, looking straight out before him, his hands clenching the wooden arms of the desk-chair in which he sat. “I don't know, upon my soul! They did not ask me to stay. They would be the last girls in the world to ask me to stay. But they need help just now—I could

see how much they need it—how earnest they are. If they were to fail it would break their hearts. They have set their hearts upon this—and I must stand by them! Whatever the sacrifice may be, I'll stand by them—I'll see them through."

Then he looked up and saw old Forrester, the veteran of many campaigns, looking at him with streaming eyes. He threw himself back in his chair and laughed loud and long and bitterly.

"Good Lord, Forrester, I had no idea for the moment that you were still here," he said. "I got carried away by my own thoughts—I fancied that——"

But Forrester thrust a large, soiled, imperative hand in front of him without a word. Chris looked at it for a moment, and saw that it stood greatly in need of the ministrations of a manicurist. Then he felt its fingers tighten over his own, and before he was conscious of their grasp being relaxed, Forrester had gone.

* * * * *

Chris remained in his chair thinking his thoughts for another hour.

He had spoken the truth; he did not know whether he was doing right or wrong in electing to stay in England in order to be near the two girls whom he hoped to be able to help to carry out their aim.

Sentimentality is the cynicism of the middle-aged; and all three of them were young. There had been no sentimentality in the discourse that had passed

between them on the subject of the possibility of the two girls being able to do work that would enable them to keep the man with the mortgage at bay. Chris knew perfectly well how deeply in earnest the two girls were in this matter. He knew how fully determined they were to carry out their purpose. They were the descendants of a long line of noble and notable fighters, who had lived since the days of Sir Hugo, the Crusader, and they had inherited all the stubbornness of their ancestors. They would make a bold fight to carry out their purpose, and if they failed they would never be quite the same afterwards.

Their position had an infinity of pathos in it in his eyes. Here were these two girls, who had lived all their life in a great house, and who might, if they wished, continue living there—here they were, anxious to start in an enterprise on the same terms as applied to the ordinary working girls of the world—but the terms were not the same, for the ordinary working girl was much more favourably equipped for the struggle than they were.

He knew what manner of girls they were, for two years ago he had asked one of them to marry him, and she had refused, to do so lest she should be an impediment in his career. She expected great things from him, she told him; but she had seen enough of life to make her aware of the difference between the work of the man who is free and the work of the man who is married at the outset of

his career. She had seen how the wife drags the husband down to drudgery, though he had once been on the threshold of a career. She had seen how the love of the husband and the wife had failed to survive, the disappointment of the man—the self-reproach of the woman. That, he knew, was the way the educated woman—the woman who has come to life after a hundred years of samplers—that is how the true woman looks at love and marriage, declining to yield to the old illusions regarding the deathlessness of love. Why should she yield to so transparent an illusion, when every day she may see before her eyes instances of the death and burial of love?

Muriel loved him—she had admitted so much ; and she had loved Love so dearly that she had made up her mind to take no step that might place it in peril. She wished it to remain strong and vigorous for ever. That was why she had come to an understanding with him that they were not to be bound to each other in any way. They were not even to be “engaged.”

He thought that she was going too far when she had said that they were not to consider themselves as engaged, though he agreed with her that it would be unwise to marry until his career was assured ; but she said with a laugh that she had studied the constitution of the little boy Love and she had found that he was much stronger when he was allowed to pass his early childhood in a perfectly unfettered state. He was apt to pine

away if he were bound even with the fetters of rose-blooms. (He had suggested the idea of Love's fetters being of rose-blooms tied together with gossamer.)

"The rose-blooms die so soon, and then Love is irritated at having the faded things hanging about his clean limbs," she said.

And when he asked her if, in the rose bondage of marriage, the blooms did not sometimes remain sweet for ever, she had smiled, saying,

"Marriage is the pot-pourri of the rose-blooms of Love."

* * * * *

That was two years ago; and he knew that she had been right. The affection that had arisen between them long ago had become stronger day by day; and he did not give a thought to the bitter feelings of the two or three suitors who were dismissed by the girl during these years for his sake. The successful lover is not greatly hurt by the wounds of the unsuccessful.

But what about the girl?

Every one of the other suitors was in a far better position in the world than he; one of them in particular was quite a great personage in the world—a man whose career was not problematical, but assured; and Chris knew that every intelligent person would say that, in rejecting such a man for the sake of waiting for another whose career was far from being assured, she was making a great sacrifice.

He felt the truth of this as he sat in front of his desk in the newspaper office, thinking over his position. He knew how she was making a man of him. He knew that she had sacrificed all for him, and would he falter in making one sacrifice for her?

He rang his bell, and when it was answered by the particular demon on duty that night, he asked for the first "pull" from the press of the morning's paper. He received it nice and damp, and spent a quarter of an hour reading the telegraphic news. Then he put on his overcoat, went downstairs, dropped his letter to the managing editor into the box for which it was meant, and walked home through the misty streets to his bed.

He felt happier than he had been for a long time.

CHAPTER XI

IT took Chris the greater part of the morning considering how far he might go in excusing himself from the mission which had been offered to him. He wondered how much the proprietor would stand in the way of excuses.

And then the thought occurred to him :

“What would he be prepared to do if the proprietor were to insist on his starting for South Africa the next day? Would he be prepared to resign his position on the paper for the sake of seeing those girls through with their enterprise?”

Of course he made up his mind that he would stop at nothing for their sake ; but he hoped that it would not be necessary for him to throw up his place on the paper. He hoped that he could make a plausible excuse; but failing that—would he confess to the proprietor that he had made up his mind to stay at home in order to be near two young women who thought that they should do some work in the world?

He feared that the man of the world would ask him what sort of young women were those who would allow a man to sacrifice a promising career

for their sake? That was the view which many men of the world would take of the matter—he felt pretty certain that that would be the view of the matter which the two young women themselves would take.

But he knew better than to look at the transaction in this light. He had written a book out of the fulness of his modernity with a view of illustrating what he had for a long time felt very strongly—namely, that woman, not merely woman in the abstract, but every individual woman, was a distinct entity in herself—that she was not to be regarded as a mere hanger-on upon man. Was a woman to be thought of as having no career of her own, apart from the life of a man? he had asked. Was every sacrifice to be made to assure the career of a man, and was no thought to be taken to give a woman a chance?

The book had called forth a good deal of discussion, and it had certainly called forth a good deal of correspondence between himself and many women who wore strangely unfeminine garments, women who seemed to fancy that they had solved the question of the sexes the moment that they had put on a hideous nondescript garment, though they had really only bifurcated it. When he had published this book he had no idea that he would be so soon called on to illustrate the working of his theory.

Well, he was quite ready to sacrifice himself—only he declined to call it a sacrifice—for the sake of

helping the girls into a position of workers in the world.

And then he could not conceal from himself the knowledge of the fact that Muriel Selwood was bringing herself nearer to him by this project of hers. Now and again during the past few years—since he and she had their “understanding”—he had had a misgiving when he reflected upon the difference between their positions in the world. She was the daughter of a great historic house; and if an announcement were made that she was about to marry a duke, people would have said that the match was quite a reasonable one—only the duke’s relations might have grumbled because he had neglected to marry the daughter of a wealthy American tradesman.

But what would people say if he, Chris Foxcroft, were to induce a duke’s daughter to marry him?

He had no illusions on this matter: Muriel would undoubtedly be brought nearer to him if she were to realise her project of opening a shop, even though it were only a shop for the sale of antique tapestries and furniture belonging to periods of great distinction in art.

He was actually thinking more of this particular matter than of the travesty of an ultimatum which had come from a fourteenth-century Cromwell, living in the newest city in the world on the traditions of the patriarchs.

All the air buzzed with the name of Kruger as

Chris walked to the office of *Morning's Wing*, only in groups here and there of men who were discussing the question of war in detail, the names of the Boer generals slouched through the conversation in all their native uncouthness. Chris knew them all. Every name, grossly mispronounced though it was by the uninitiated, was heard by him through an atmosphere of unkempt beards and unwashed bodies, as it were—grizzled memories of his rapid days and nights of intense observation spent in the Transvaal. The phrases of the well-informed were to his ear what the gnarled trunk of a winter elm is to the eye. This was the impression which he had originally formed of the language of the Transvaal; and now as he heard a word or two of it—as much as could be gained from the cautious newspapers—uttered by the experts in a smoking-room of the club which he entered for a minute or two, he felt that his early impressions had not been quite bold enough. What was in his mind now was not the gnarled trunk but the disinterred bog fir. The Transvaal tongue is the mangrove swamp of languages.

But what was his excuse to be?

He was quite unable to make up his mind on this point. He thought it better to trust to the atmospheric pressure of the moment in the proprietor's room.

And he was right.

“I am glad that you can see your way to do the

office work, Foxcroft," said the Master of the Brains—the middleman between the Brains and the Public. "I need scarcely say that I know the reason for your self-sacrifice and appreciate it fully. It does you great honour, and I can promise you that you will never repent it. Forrester was here just now."

Chris was slightly bewildered at first, but it gradually dawned on him that Mr. Forrester, his visitor of the previous night, had lost no time in approaching the proprietor on the subject of going to the Seat of War, and that he had given the proprietor to understand that Chris had presented him with the reversion of the post which had been offered to him. He also perceived that it was the proprietor's belief that he was ready to sacrifice himself and his own inclinations for the sake of doing the veteran a good turn.

"Forrester proved himself by his promptitude to be the right man for the job," said Chris. "But I assure you that, so far as he is concerned, I do not consider that the self-sacrifice——"

"You need not tell me that you are not anxious to go out to this Transvaal racket," said the proprietor.

"I won't say quite so much, sir," said Chris, "only——"

"Ah, better not say anything more," said the other with a laugh.

Chris thought that on the whole this advice was excellent. He could not see that anything would be gained by an attempt on his part to acquaint Mr. Meadows with his true reason for staying at home.

"We shall need you here for some time," resumed that gentleman. "You know the country well and it will be a good thing for us to have your daily comments as to the topography of every district mentioned in the cables. We must make a lot out of the topography at first. I have already sent for all the maps."

"You would do well to send to Germany if you want accurate maps," suggested Chris.

"Then we shall send to Germany. I know how it will be in this business: every night there will be references in the cables to drifts, and kloofs, and kops and kopjes, that no one here has ever heard of. I hope you took very ample topographical notes when you were out there."

"I think I have a pretty good working knowledge of the frontiers, sir. I gave some attention to the frontiers in view of this business, which I knew would come some day."

"I suppose our troops will not cross the Transvaal frontier for at least a month. It would be unwise for them to advance much sooner than a month."

"Yes, I should say they will keep themselves well in hand for a month—perhaps for four months."

"Heavens above! Four months, did you say? What on earth will they be doing on the frontier for four months?"

"Fighting for their lives," said Chris.

And at that moment the mortifying truth was impressed upon him that his proprietor had not read a

good deal that he had written regarding the heavy armaments and munitions of war which the Transvaal Government had been importing during several years. Indeed, he greatly feared that the War Office authorities had not been giving as much attention to those articles of his as they deserved.

His apprehensions in this respect were not groundless, as subsequent events proved.

"Don't write all that you know just now," said Mr. Meadows. "You must remember that it is the first duty of a newspaper at such a time as this to be patriotic; and to be optimistic is to be patriotic in the day of battle. People only remember what you write from one day to the next. If you are optimistic you cheer people up—and they get to like a cheerful paper; but if you prophesy evil things they confound you for a raven, and if your prophecy is realised, not only do they fail to give you credit for your perception, they actually fancy that you had something to do with the catastrophe. We must be patriotic."

"We must be optimistic," said Chris, listening to this exposition of the whole duty of an editor from the mouth of one who had found optimism to be the most paying form of philosophy. In the case of *Morning's Wing* it paid twenty-two per cent.

And then came that hurricane wave of patriotism over the country, and Chris Foxcroft was swept along upon it; sometimes whirled on its crest, sometimes spinning about in the eddies of its hollows. He had

occasionally to catch his breath, so violent were the outbursts of the spindrift of this patriotic billow ; and he did not always find it easy to keep his head clear in the midst of the tumult that accompanied it. A wave of patriotism scarcely leaves one a breathing space ; and when it begins to break along the shore it is louder than the sound of many waters. The voice of a great people who have taken as their emblem the lion, is, logically and zoologically, a roar. It makes up in volume what it lacks in euphony. Heard from a distance it sounds like thunder, and then people hearing it say that it sounds like the voice of God. These people are the truest patriots.

The streets were full of the electricity which brings about the thunder-storm of patriotism. Men gripped each other's hands, as if those hands were sword hilts ; their ordinary speech had the ring of a cheer about it, and the tread of the crowds through the streets had the rant and rhythm of a war march. It was a war march. The whole nation was awake, alive, and marching—marching—marching as one strong man to war and to victory. No one living had ever before heard the clang and the clash and the swagger and the swing of that march through the streets of the town. The flag was flying above the roofs, and now and again a gleam of sunlight shot through the grey fog upon the folds of that emblem, and the people in the streets below were satisfied that the sun was still shining on the flag and would never set ; it made people feel somehow

that God was on their side still. The English are not yet, thank Heaven, a pack of infidels.

And then the cheers in the street while the troops were marching to the trains! Khaki was the word which the people heard for the first time, and after a pause—the sort of pause that a child makes who hears a new word—they began to try if they could say it. They said it in a whisper at first—low and with hesitation; but soon they got to see what could be done with it, and they shouted it at the top of their voices. Khaki—Khaki—Khaki! The troops in khaki marched along to the trains, and thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of the people—men, women, and clerks—cheered them, and ran beside them, shouting out the latest doggerel with the word soldier in it, until they had no more breath left to join in with the hundreds of thousands who were singing “God save the Queen” with their hats in the air, while the men in khaki leant six deep out of the windows of the train, waving and cheering as they passed out of the terminus into Eternity (most of them).

And then the music halls with the electric blaze about them from portal to roof, and the electric blaze of patriotism, rushing round the thousands of men and women who waited with eager faces for the girl with the silk flags and the short skirts who came before the footlights to sing her doggerel! And then the lady who came before the footlights to recite her doggerel with a tambourine, greeted

with a fusillade of coins and more shouting! All these were phases of patriotism, and people who became aware of them knew that all the country had become one man, one voice—and that voice the greatest that has ever been heard in the world—the voice of a free people on the side of Freedom, ready to fight for it—ready to die for it!

Then came an echo of this voice from across the seas—the cry of the Colonies: “We are by your side!”

People at first scarcely knew what it meant. They had often considered the question of England’s defending her Colonies; the question of her Colonies defending England had never come forward for discussion. England was the Mother who talks about her bairns—not realising the fact that they are approaching maturity, until an amazing moment comes to assure her of the truth. England awoke amazed to the voice in her own speech that rang clear from across the Atlantic—from across the Pacific—from across every ocean of the world: “We are by your side!”

By the grace of God the children had come to maturity and had drawn their swords in defence of their Mother.

And the Mother of all looked on—amazed—overjoyed—overwhelmed, and gave thanks to Heaven.

It was then that the people who spoke a different tongue, hearing this brothers’ converse which they could not understand—seeing a sight such as had

never been seen since the world began—seeing a fleet of transports start daily on a voyage of over six thousand miles from two English ports—it was then that the other nations—the Simian and the Saurian—began to revile what they could not understand; but the transports continued to sail—transports by the hundred—men by the ten thousand.

The nation of shop-keepers had become a nation of soldiers, and no one outside the nation knew how it had been done.

And the transports continued to sail—transports from Southampton, transports from the St. Lawrence, transports from Melbourne, transports from Sydney, transports from Brisbane, transports from Auckland, transports from Bombay.

And the Flag of England flew from every peak.

CHAPTER XII

"WE are in town; come and see us before you go."

That was the letter which Chris received a few days after the fleet of transports had begun to sail for Table Bay.

He had not written either to Muriel or Joan to let them know that he was to stay at home. He had no heart for writing about anything, save only the transports; and he had disciplined himself into writing about them without that burning at heart which he had felt at first. Forrester had gone in the first steamer, and he was remaining at home—that was all there was to be said on the matter. He did not eat his heart out at the thought of his doing garrison duty at home while the other men were under fire in the veldt. He did not—after the first day or two—feel that his act of self-denial had in it some of the elements of the heroic. He simply did his daily work, and every one said that his daily work was the best which was being done in England.

Good old Forrester had taken care that his colleagues should know that Chris had behaved

nobly in yielding up to another the position which had been offered to him ; this was Forrester's fiction, offered, first to the ear of the proprietor, and having had its plausibility put to the test in that direction, to the ear of the staff. Forrester's conscience had its peculiarities, but it was on the whole easily amenable to discipline : it could be reasoned with, and it assured him that he was only doing what was fair when he made himself, in conversation with his colleagues, the object of Foxcroft's act of self-sacrifice, though all the time he knew perfectly well that (as usual) a girl was somehow mixed up with this affair—that Foxcroft had, on her account, elected to do garrison duty instead of going on active service in the field.

Good old Forrester did not mind. He knew that Chris had done him a good turn and he was anxious to do Chris a good turn. He thought him a bit of a fool, but then there was the girl!

Thus was Chris relieved from a position which he would have found difficulty in explaining so as to make it clear to the staff of an enterprising journal, that he was not irretrievably a fool. As the matter stood on the showing of good old Forrester, there were some members of the literary staff who thought that he was a bit of a fool. But most of them simply thought that he was a good fellow, and this did him no great injustice.

"Come and see us before you go," Muriel wrote.

He went to them with the delay of only a few

hours. He had disciplined himself, and he had confidence in his ability to make them accept Forrester's story when he had subjected it to a slight artistic modification.

They were at Lady Humber's; and he learned that their father was also in town, but that he was staying at his club so as to be near the War Office.

"Near the War Office!" said Chris. "Oh, in order to get news from Smeaton, I suppose?"

The girls shook their heads.

"He has applied for a battery," said Muriel.

"Why shouldn't he? He is as good to-day as he ever was. He is only fifty-three. He only retired from the service because he thought he could make something out of that wretched financing. There is nothing for you to look surprised at, Chris. Now is there?" cried Joan.

"Nothing—there is nothing to be surprised at; I know your father," said Chris. "If he had not done what he has done, it would have been surprising. Will he be successful?"

"He has some good friends, but—well, he is full of hope," said Muriel. "But how about yourself, Chris? When do you start?"

"I'm not going out, after all," said Chris, with a laugh that suggested a man affecting complete indifference on a topic of casual interest.

"What?" cried both girls. "Not going—not——" Then the duet divided itself into parts.

"I hope that nothing—that is—I hope that——"

Muriel's sentence was punctuated with notes of interrogation only.

"I'm amazed—quite amazed!" cried Joan. Her notes were of admiration.

He laughed again, no more satisfactorily than before.

"Something must have happened," said Muriel, still inquiringly.

"Of course something has happened," said Joan. "You had your heart set on going out. You remember that you actually blushed red when I suggested that you were anxious for the war to begin."

"I spoke too soon," said Chris. "You see, before one makes up one's mind to adopt a certain course, it is always wise to have a word or two with those people who are the final arbiters on the question whether or not one will be permitted to adopt that course."

"You mean to say that Mr. Meadows"—Mr. Meadows was the proprietor of *Morning's Wing*—"declined to——"

Muriel's tone was not quite indignant, it was only such a tone as suggested the possibility of indignation following.

"Mr. Meadows offered me the post, and I declined it," said Chris. "That's really all there is to be said on the subject. I had no difficulty in persuading him that it would be to the advantage of every one—including good old Forrester who goes out in my

place—if I were to stand by the lugger until this storm is over. Now you have the whole thing in a nutshell.”

“Who is ‘good old Forrester’?” inquired Muriel, after a pause that implied some doubt on her part.

“He is the veteran war correspondent,” said Chris. “He is always alluded to in those terms when people print anything about him or give his photograph. He has a wife and four children—perhaps six—and he has managed to send one boy to Harrow,” he added, thinking it well to be circumstantial. He perceived that it would be necessary for him to make as much as possible out of the case of Mr. Forrester.

“And you gave up your chance to him?” said Muriel. “You are a good fellow, Chris—indeed you are.”

“Oh, so good—so good,” said Joan.

“Nonsense!” he cried. “Don’t go away with the idea that I was such a fool—well, perhaps not a fool: quixotic will do—don’t fancy that I hadn’t come to see that—that—well, that there are things for me to do at home that are quite as important as any other interests that one may have. There is the topographical question, for instance. Mr. Meadows, very properly, thinks that I have a great mission before me—a great duty—namely, to keep people at home quite straight as to the nature of the scene of operations in South Africa. It will be mine to inculcate upon the readers of *Morning’s*

Wing the exact difference between a drift and a laager—a kloof and a kopje. Oh yes; I will take care that no mistake is made."

The girls had ears, and one of the girls loved the man. They analysed his tone to three places of decimals.

"You are terribly disappointed," said Muriel.

"Poor Chris!" said Joan, looking at him wistfully. The wistfulness in her look frightened him; if they had ears he had eyes. "You are worse than disappointed: you are resigned. Nothing is so hopeless as resignation."

"I'm afraid that I have not succeeded in making you understand this affair," said he. "I assure you there's no question of being resigned in the matter. I was disappointed a little at first—no, now that I come to reflect, I wasn't even disappointed: I was glad—glad to have it revealed to me in such an unmistakable way, that I was a good chap at heart. I give you my word that I was—and a bit surprised into the bargain. It was a flattering piece of self-revelation. Most pieces of self-revelation have been distinctly unflattering to me. Good old Forrester gave me more credit than was due to me all round. And Mr. Meadows is the decentest chap alive. He was never guilty of an act of injustice in his life. He has a sort of litmus-paper conscience: it changes colour before his very eyes when he makes use of an acid phrase over anything. I have heard him apologise. It's not a good work-a-day conscience

for a newspaper office. You have heard of Professor Severn's micro-electrometer? It is so sensitive of the presence of electricity that if you pass your fingers through your hair it registers to a hair's breadth—literally to a hair's breadth—the force of the electric current so generated. That's a beautiful instrument, but it would never do for the ordinary rough work of the postal telegraph department."

"Why all this newspaper-paragraph science?" asked Muriel. "Why this wisdom of the short leading article? I am sure that we all think Mr. Meadows an excellent fellow; but why display a water-drop of his conscience, magnified ten thousand diameters on the magic-lantern sheet with the lime-light behind it?"

"Oh, I was just wishing to assure you. You seemed to need some strong assurance that Mr. Meadows would do nothing unjust to me or any one else—that's all," said Chris. "And now tell me about yourselves. Do you know, it just occurred to me as I was walking here, that, as I am staying at home, I may be able to see you through in this campaign of yours and let the British Empire lumber on in its own way. Have you been thinking out any scheme—anything new—strikingly new, mind?"

Muriel shook her head.

"I can only think of my painting," she said. "But you say that no one wants to buy pictures nowadays."

"No; some people want portraits painted; but modern portraits are exactly the opposite to pictures," said Chis. "There is a painter who caricatures Jews on canvas, and critics—the little circle of critics—say that he paints people's souls. Well, he may do that; but he hasn't made a picture yet. And what about you, my Joan? have you been thinking out any novelty—any vocal surprise?"

"Why, you are to do all the thinking," said Joan. "Girls haven't yet been taught to think. You were giving us an example of the science of the newspaper paragraph. Well, haven't you heard of atrophy? Pigs had once long tails; and they used to hang on by them to the branches of trees, having previously climbed the trees; but so soon as they got out of the way of climbing trees, their tails became short and ridiculous—the way they are to-day—because they had ceased to use them. Isn't that the meaning of atrophy?"

"It's good enough science for the million," said Chris. "But I wouldn't drag in the pig; I would rather talk about the Great Auk of the Mauritius."

"One is as good as the other. Either of these notable examples is sufficient to explain on a scientific basis the reason why woman cannot think nowadays. She came down from the tree about twenty thousand years ago; and, since then, man has done all the thinking for her."

"And you are to maintain the tradition, my dear Chris," said Muriel. "You are to think us into two

money-making businesses. We want to climb trees again."

"Alas! Alas!" said Chris.

Before he could tell them the result of his application of thought to their aspirations, Colonel Selwood entered the room.

"It's no use," he cried. "The War Office is still the War Office. It is still a machine. Machines cannot differentiate in regard to the individuals that drop the penny into the slot. They give the chocolate to the gouty as well as to the non-gouty. The retired rule works like the cast-iron machinery of the automatic machine."

"You applied for a battery, I hear," said Chris.

"And I didn't get one. Nothing more is to be said."

"Nothing more just yet. But don't send your portmanteau up to the box-room, colonel. You keep it at hand packed. And you take my advice, and get measured for a suit of khaki by your own tailor. You wouldn't like to take the field in a ready-made uniform, would you now?"

Colonel Selwood shook his head.

"I would like to think that you are right, Chris," he said. "But if you only saw the list that I was shown at the War Office—men with records—all anxious to go to the front. I have no chance. Good heavens! You should have seen what I saw in the corridor of the War Office. It was like a new Commander-in-Chief's levée. All the old faces. Good

heavens! . . . You wouldn't believe it. Collison was there—old Collison! Why, he was my major before I got my jacket. 'What are you doing here?' I asked him. 'Looking for news about your grandson, eh?' He has a grandson in Smeaton's battery, you know. 'Grandson be hanged! I'm here on my own account,' he cried. 'I want them to give me a command out there—anything—anything. If they won't give me a brigade, I'll drive a Commissariat wagon.' That was old Collison—and he was a senior major when I was at Woolwich. And Llewellyn—who took the Taffies into action at Candahar where he got his V.C.—he is seventy if he is a day—might be my father, by George—he would be content with anything on the staff of anybody. I tell you the whole place was crowded. I saw that I had no chance. If Firebrace was at home and they gave him a Division he might lend me a hand; he owes me one—but he is not at home and so I have no chance. It's to be all over in four months—that's the contract time."

"Whoever accepted the contract to finish the campaign in four months did not know as much of his business as I do," said Chris. "We don't bind ourselves down to figures on *Morning's Wing*, though we take an optimistic tone to cheer up our readers; but if the flag is flying over Pretoria by May, no one need complain. But take my word for it, there will be a good deal of complaining between now and then—that opinion is not for publication.

Keep up your heart, Colonel ; you'll have a chance of being riddled by Mausers sooner than you think."

Colonel Selwood shook his head.

"It's like you to take a cheery view of the matter, Chris," said he. "But it's no use mincing matters. If Firebrace was only—— But it's no use—no use."

He had been walking up and down the room all the time he was speaking—very few of his strides were sufficient to reach its boundaries in any direction—and now he sat down quietly in the only chair that would carry him. Lady Humber's furniture was not made to withstand the strain of a great national crisis

Chris laughed with the easy confidence of the man who writes articles on imperial questions.

"Good luck to you!" was all he said as he shook hands with the girls and picked up his hat.

He had scarcely reached the end of the little hall when he heard his name called from the top of the stairs—Lady Humber's drawing-room was a flight up.

"Oh, Chris, I forgot," shouted Joan, running down and getting in front of the handmaid who was endeavouring to struggle past Chris in time to open the hall door. "I'll let Mr. Foxcroft out," she said, and the handmaid went leisurely toward her own quarters.

"What have you forgotten?" he asked.

"It was only an excuse," whispered Joan. "What

I want to say is this—that—I have excellent eyesight, Chris, and I can read between the lines without the aid of spectacles. Chris—dear Chris, you have done this for us—it was not for Forrester but for us; and so I want to kiss you, dear old Chris, and to tell you that you are the truest man that lives. I knew that when you said you would see us through, you would do it, though all the transports in the world were off to Table Bay. You are a true man, Chris, and I kiss you as I would kiss the hand of a hero."

And so she did—twice—with a smile on her face and a sob in her throat.

"Hush!" he whispered. "Don't run away with the notion that I have sacrificed anything. Above all, she—she must never know. Cannot you see that she would be miserable if she thought that she was coming between me—and—and that? You will not do me so ill a turn as to give her a hint, Joan, dear?"

"Not now—not now—but I will tell her on the day she marries you, Chris, and I don't think that it will make her miserable to know it then."

"God bless you, my dear!" he said; and he went away with a tear from her cheek upon his lips.

It was the sweetest thing that he had ever tasted.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRIS felt quite distinctly that he had his hands full in these days. He had to keep *Morning's Wing* right in regard to its South African topography, and he had to explain to the readers of the paper what would be the probable preliminaries taken by the British generals in their triumphant march to Pretoria. He had also to give a satisfactory reply to those ladies who were organising a masked ball for the purpose of providing every soldier in South Africa with a plum pudding on Christmas Day, and who wanted to know if the simple address "Pretoria" would be sufficient to put on the consignments, or would it be well to leave the name of the exact town a blank until the moment of shipment.

He told them that perhaps on the whole it would be safer to leave a blank space for the name of the town. It was so difficult to say where the headquarters of the British Army might be by Christmas. After marching to Pretoria they might suddenly be ordered to another town where there was better barrack accommodation. In any case a stencil

plate with the name—when ascertained—could easily be cut at the last moment.

And then he had to think out the problem which Muriel and Joan had set for him.

They were desperately in earnest in their endeavour to free themselves from the bondage of generations—the bondage of idleness—the bondage of engaging in unprofitable work—the bondage of “accomplishments.” He knew perfectly well that woman’s curse has been her “accomplishments.” The woman who accomplishes nothing in life is the woman who has trusted to her “accomplishments.” The little painting—the little singing—the little strumming on the piano—a little of languages—these are the stock-in-trade of the girl who has been fully educated, and she fancies that there is money in every one of them until she tries to earn money by any one of them and finds out her mistake.

Chris had often thought it his duty to point out how girls were being educated in the science of helplessness, and the good-humoured people about him had laughed, assuring him that a girl’s duty in life was simply to qualify herself to become the good wife of a bad man—that was really what their assurances amounted to. They did not insist on the badness of the man, but Chris knew that the man they had in their eye was a rascal—a rascal who needed to be reformed by the gracious influence of a good woman and a baby. That was woman’s mission in life: the husband and the baby.

He did not deny it. But he denied that the social problem ended here. He saw how cautious men were becoming in the matter of choosing wives—how men nowadays had accustomed themselves to wait until they were thirty-five or forty years old before getting married: and he knew that when men have waited so long as this, they are strongly tempted to wait the rest of their life: hence the possibility that a girl may have to wait single for the rest of her life also. Long ago men were incautious: they married when they were eighteen in quite considerable numbers; and a man who remained unmarried at twenty-five was thought to be—and probably was—a foe to his country.

Thus it was that women were being compelled to work for their own existence nowadays, and only to think vaguely of what used to be the sole career open to a woman—Marriage and the Hearth.

Chris had faced the problem long ago: he felt sure that it would be gradually solved. Even now, when the nation was rejoicing at the idea of battle without quite knowing why, it was taking a step toward the solution of a great economic question. Nature, he knew, made all her calculations upon a basis of war between males, and if these wars did not occur, her calculations were upset, and the consequence was social disturbance that civilisation faced, but did not get rid of, by calling it a problem.

Chris knew all this, and he had found all his knowledge on the subject to be very useful for

newspaper purposes, but it did not help him greatly in his attempt to face the concrete form of the problem. What were Muriel and Joan to do for a living?

The fact that some weeks went by without finding him nearer to an answer, may possibly be accepted as indicating in some measure the ease with which one may theorise for the general, and yet find a difficulty in the way of meeting the case of the individual.

Was the class of work which he was trying to find for these two girls, precisely the class of work which so many other girls were trying to find for themselves—some work which would not involve their binding themselves down to any routine form of life, or the passing of any portion of the day in the midst of uncongenial surroundings—some work which could be done without involving any association with women whose habits might not be pleasant—and yet some work which would be highly remunerative?

He knew that there was no use in his suggesting any scheme of employment to which exception might be taken by their father; and thus he was still further restricted in his search. He did not wish to fight with such an antagonist as Colonel Selwood.

And then all at once there was knocked out of his head and the heads of a good many other people every thought of the lesser and individual questions of life, for something occurred which startled almost

the very Music Hall platforms out of their jaunty self-confidence.

The newspapers called it a Check to the British Advance. Some that wished to be very fair, called it a Reverse; and one alluded to it, for the greater part of a day, as a Disaster.

It is almost forgotten now: there have been so many checks to the British advance that one cannot remember the details of any one without the assistance of one's counterfoils. But this, being the first, fell upon the country in the nature of a surprise to render men speechless. A portion of the British Army had actually been cut off by the farmers with the slouch hats and the trousers turned up like a navvy's—infantry regiments with historical records—and cavalry—British Cavalry Soldiers, mind—actually cut off and compelled to throw down their arms and to march off as prisoners under an escort of the slouching farmers!

It seemed as if the little imp Puck had taken over the duties of the great god Mars, playing his ridiculous pranks even at the cannon's mouth. Such pranks were in very doubtful taste, and of a humour that was rather more than doubtful. They made people who had been writing the songs of brag for the Music Halls seem rather ridiculous, and the man who had been writing bugle calls in the newspapers seem more ridiculous still. The Man in the Street stared at his neighbours, and said it was a lie—and spat out and walked on.

And then came the first list of casualties.

Later on came the news that the cannon's mouth at which the imp Puck had indulged in his fun, was a British gun and that it was of an obsolete pattern; whereas the guns opposed to it—the guns of the farmers—were of the most recent construction and far more plentiful in South Africa than the British weapons.

The Head of the War Office said England had really had no notion that the farmers were so well prepared to fight. People asked where was the Intelligence Department.

Then there came the news of another garrison fighting for their lives and only saved from annihilation by a naval force sending from the nearest seaport a couple of guns taken out of a ship of war and never meant to be moved on a gun carriage.

And then came the news of another reverse, with hundreds of lives lost and thousands of prisoners handing over the Queen's swords to the Queen's enemies—of a third reverse, with another long death roll—of a whole brigade marching with apparently no misgivings into the jaws of a trap so simple that the farmers would not have dreamt of laying it for a rat.

But the Highlanders died all the same like rats in that trap, and the farmers found themselves with a dozen captured guns and some hundreds of prisoners to maintain. Yes, the British Army was finding its way to Pretoria.

A crisis had come.

And then the English nation showed all the other nations—Simian and Saurian—that they meant to take their crisis standing. The gloom only lasted a day. The faltering did not last through the swing of a pendulum.

The nation had taken its coat off.

That was what happened after it had received a blow or two in the face. It was taking its crisis standing up with its coat off.

There was a call for men, and from every part of the Empire once again came the cry :

“We are coming—we are coming!”

A quarter of a million of men would have been forthcoming—half a million—four times half a million if they had been needed. They marched through the streets—not the scum of the great cities, not the off-scouring of the gaols, but England's best men. The heads of the great English houses—the descendants of the great commanders who had given freedom in the past to almost every State in Europe—the descendants of the soldiers who had dictated terms of peace in the past to almost every State in Europe—they marched with their Yeomen to the trains to carry them to the transports. And after them came the Yeomen of the City—Volunteers of the City—men ready and willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of their country.

That was what the crisis brought about—the finest pageant of devotion that the country had seen for

centuries ; the noblest display of self-sacrifice, and such a spirit of unanimity as had never before been witnessed in the world. The whole nation had but one voice, and not a note of that voice was heard to complain of the reverses of the past. The voice was one of calm determination to see the business through to the very end, whatever the end might be.

That is the story of England's crisis of December, 1899.

Of course Chris Foxcroft had been right in his predictions ; but happily no one remembered this against him. Only the most vindictive of his friends will remember the man who occupies the irritating position of being the only one who was right. And Chris took very good care never to remind any of his readers that he had now and again given them hints that over confidence was only the note of the music hall hero. He was too busy keeping the people abreast of the topography of the telegrams from day to day.

The day that he got the news that General Firebrace had been offered and had accepted a high command—hours before it had been given to the public—he wired it to Colonel Selwood. Selwood came up to town by the next train, and when the news of General Firebrace's appointment appeared in the papers, the information was also forthcoming that Colonel Selwood, C.B., would have a place on his staff, and that the General and his staff would sail on Saturday.

Chris saw him on the Friday. Selwood had not been so calm for several months.

"Chris," he said, "I have set everything in order so far as was in my power, in case of accident. You are the best chap I know and the most sane. That is why I want you to look after the girls while I am away. I have been more or less of a fool in dabbling in that dirty water—the dirty water out of which I hoped to wash some gold; but still my man of business tells me there is no need to be anxious about a provision for the girls. Of course when the place is let they will have ample. By the way, I have instructed Vickers that any offer in regard to the letting of the house or any of the property is to be submitted to you. You have a long head. You know what should be done. I'm not so sure of Vickers. He doesn't know so much about men as you do. Don't let the girls do anything foolish. They have been talking something about finding employment. Of course they don't know what they are talking about. You and I know that they are not the girls to sell stamps behind a wire netting in a suburban post-office, and I don't know what else they aspire to. Anyhow, you'll keep your eye on them, and see that they don't make fools of themselves. They believe in you, you know."

"I hope they do," said Chris. "I would do a great deal to—but there's no use in bragging. They are the best girls that ever lived."

"I think they are," said the father thoughtfully. "I think that you are the luckiest chap alive to have found such a girl as Muriel willing to—— Ah, there's no use saying anything more on that point."

"I am the luckiest chap in the world to love a girl whose father is broad-minded enough to approve of a situation which most fathers would not tolerate for an hour," said Chris.

"My dear boy," said Colonel Selwood, "I told you long ago how I look at this matter. I want my daughter to marry a man whom I know to be the right man. That's all I have got to say"

"Good luck to you," said Chris. "You are the best friend I ever had."

And so they parted at that time.

But Chris stood by the side of Muriel and Joan on the following afternoon, waving their handkerchiefs among thousands of others while the big Cape liner slid away from her moorings at Southampton, carrying on her deck the veteran General Firebrace and his staff to retrieve the mistakes of the previous month. It was a chill, grey afternoon with promise of plentiful rain to come; but at sea there were splashes and patches of white among the quivering clouds of the Channel. The smoke from the three steamers visible was blown into the form of a low bastioned wall of a fortification and hung heavily over the water. A slant of rain came with a chill gust from the West. It was a depressing evening.

CHAPTER XIV

HE could not disguise from himself that he felt a good deal easier in his mind now that Colonel Selwood had gone to South Africa. He knew he should have had a hard fight with Selwood before he should succeed in inducing him to allow his daughters to carry out their experiment. Selwood was, as Chris had admitted, a broad-minded man; but the mind of a man who has been in the army for twenty-five years is not illimitably broad, and Chris felt sure that Selwood's horizon was not sufficiently wide to embrace within its girth the scheme which his daughters had (vaguely) before their eyes for earning money on their own behalf.

Now, however, that the girls and he had a free hand, so to speak, all that remained for him to do was to hit upon the right scheme for making that money which they so greatly needed.

Yes, that was all he had to do, Joan reminded him quite thoughtfully on the Monday. He had taken them with their aunt, Lady Humber, to the theatre, with a view of cheering them up—he actually hoped that he might cheer them up by showing them how witless a modern comedy has become. But

indeed Lady Humber was cheered up: she said she could remember Toole.

"I am thinking out things at this very moment," said he. "I was looking at the panels of the ceiling of the theatre. I was also giving some attention to the decoration of the boxes outside, and I was set thinking of many schemes. By the way, what does Mr. Vickers think regarding the likelihood of getting a tenant for Selwood?"

"He thinks that he took too roseate a view of the situation in assuming that some millionaire would be a great enough fool to take over the place," said Muriel.

"After all, it would be ridiculous to assume that because a man happens to be a millionaire, he must also be a fool," said Joan.

"And how much longer do you intend keeping on that retinue of servants?" he inquired.

"Oh, Mr. Vickers says he can still manage to pay the servants from week to week," said Muriel. "Of course they will be on board wages until we go back. The place must be properly kept up for Smeaton."

"Of course it must," said he. "But fifty pounds a week to pay for servants, alone does sound a bit high. My own belief is that Selwood is looked on in the neighbourhood as a sort of superior almshouse—a kind of home of rest for people who are past work. I should like to go down and clear out the lot. What are the 'harbourers,' for instance?"

"Philologists differ as to the origin of the name, you know that as well as I do," said Joan. "You cannot disturb a class of servant whose name is so antique that philologists are divided about it—that would be unreasonable."

"And what are their duties?" he asked.

"Heavens, my dear Chris, how is it possible for any one to define their duties when one doesn't know what their name imports?"

"And the three 'leverers'—what are their duties, beyond the receiving of a pound a week each?" he asked.

"The view that I most strongly incline to is that they were originally the men who looked after the rabbits—the leverets—levereters they were possibly termed long ago, and this awkward word soon became 'leverers' in the pronunciation of the villagers. You can't turn a man adrift simply because you are unable to tell the derivation of his calling."

"I think I could snatch six or seven hundred a year out of the fire in the way of servants' wages alone," said Chris.

"I daresay you could; but still Selwood is Selwood," said Joan quietly. •

"Yes," acquiesced Muriel. "Selwood is Selwood. We are the *nouveaux pauvres*, but we have still some pride left."

He clearly perceived that these girls, thoroughly modern though they were in regard to their ideas

on some subjects—such as the dignity of work—were quite as old-fashioned as their father on any point that touched upon the glory of their great house. They were anxious to work for their living rather than live upon borrowed money, but they would never consent to the disbandment of the great army of picturesquely named idlers who were quartered upon Selwood, and found it infinitely preferable to even the most favourite workhouse.

He said nothing more on the subject of the “harbourers” or the “leverers”; after all, perhaps there were some people who might find it a positive attraction to a house to be asked to provide for the maintenance of several servants the designation of whose duties set philologists quarrelling among themselves.

He sincerely hoped that such a fool might put in an appearance very shortly; though he agreed with the girls in thinking that Mr. Vickers, the family lawyer, had taken too optimistic a view of mankind in suggesting the possibility of a lucrative tenant being forthcoming. After all, Mr. Vickers had not been thoughtlessly optimistic regarding the frequency with which fools and their money were to be encountered in daily life. He had shaken his head; and that is not a recognised innuendo of the optimist.

The next day Chris went to the place of business of Messrs. Denbigh & Parr, the great furnishers. He had once been able to oblige Mr. Parr in a

material way, and thus he had the boldness to send in his name to that very exclusive gentleman. It was generally understood that Mr. Parr never saw on matters of business any person who was of lesser rank than an earl—and that too of the United Kingdom—or a fully paid-up millionaire of the United States. He himself was too modest to make a parade of this exclusiveness: he admitted having once done business face to face with a commoner who had attained to Cabinet rank. As a rule people were quite satisfied to do their business with one of the young men, who wore clinker-built frock coats and talked patronisingly of the Renaissance. Most people who wanted a table or a chair thought it a privilege to be attended to by a young man who was on speaking terms with the Renaissance.

Of course Mr. Parr was pleased to see him. Mr. Parr knew that Mr. Foxcroft had the ear of Mr. Meadows, the proprietor of *Morning's Wing*, and Mr. Parr had just heard that Mr. Meadows had purchased a house in South Audley Street—it might almost be called Grosvenor Square—which would certainly require to be beautified within. He thought that it was quite possible that Mr. Foxcroft might have some suggestion to make, with regard to commission in certain contingencies.

"I hope I have not taken you away from any particular business, Mr. Parr, for my business is—well, not quite business," said Chris apologetically. He had not at first intended to be apologetic; but

he could not refrain from feeling a little awe in the presence of Mr. Parr—the sort of awe that even strong-minded people feel when in the presence of a world-wide advertiser.

“So pleased to see you, Mr. Foxcroft,” said Mr. Parr. “I was not engaged—that is, not particularly; and I know that newspaper men just now—— Terrible business this war, Mr. Foxcroft—terrible; but I think that Firebrace is the right man for us. Firebrace should have been thought of earlier, sir: we sold him the only complete set of Sheraton chairs that ever passed through my hands.”

“Yes; they should have thought of Firebrace sooner,” said Chris, cordially acquiescing in Mr. Parr’s suggested logic. “But we can hope that it is not yet too late for him to retrieve some of the blunders that have been committed.”

“I have every confidence in General Firebrace,” said Mr. Parr; and Chris had the sense to perceive that nothing more remained to be said about General Firebrace.

“I have been consulted upon a matter regarding which I should like your advice, Mr. Parr,” said he, after a decent pause to allow of the martial music associated with the name of General Firebrace, to die away into the distance, so to speak. “The fact is that a friend of mine has a daughter who is anxious to take up the—the—profession of decorating interiors—doing panels and, if necessary, ceilings. She is quite a clever artist, most intelligent and

tractable. I thought you would be able to tell me if there's any show for the exercise of this form of art in England. I don't want her to waste her time."

Mr. Parr smiled as vaguely as doth a brass door knob after a shower of rain.

"Hotels mainly," said he. "There is some very fine hand-painting done in some hotels in London. We have done most of them—ceilings, panels, doors and cornices. You must have noticed some of the restaurants—the Papillon, for instance—early Empire ; or the Astrifiammante—a copy of one of the rooms in the Borghese. Oh, yes ; we do quite a number of hotels and restaurants ; but among private individuals the taste has not yet been developed. They prefer wall paper that they can buy by the piece. Japanese leather paper, as it is called, is also extremely popular."

"So much I have gathered," said Chris, "from the occasional visits I have paid to the hand-painted hotels. They are very, very magnificent."

"Some of them are too magnificent, Mr. Foxcroft," said Mr. Parr. "We are not, I regret to say, permitted to use our own judgment in these points. You see, the directors have usually a lot of money to start with, and they insist on our spending it for them. They say, 'Here's this dining-room ; your estimate is for four thousand five hundred ; you must manage to put another seven hundred of gilding upon it, and then it will be the best gilded

saloon in London.' Well, what can we do, Mr. Foxcroft? I ask you candidly, sir, what is there left for us to do?"

"I congratulate you on your adroitness in minimising a disaster," said Chris. "The temptation to spoil a room must be very great. But of course you have the reputation of a great art business to maintain, Mr. Parr. But where do your artists come from?"

"Mostly from Italy," said Mr. Parr. "If you were to ask an English artist to come and paint your walls for you he would feel insulted—and tell you so. Besides, they are too stiff; they have no lightness of touch. If you were to ask them to paint you a Cupid or two, they would get a Board School child to stand as a model and every Cupid would be a Board School brat. The Italians understand their business, and three pounds a week means a lot of money to them."

"My friend's daughter has a charming touch—a dainty touch—there is no risk of her doing anything stodgy," said Chris. "I wonder, would it suit you to give her a chance?"

"The risk would be too great, Mr. Foxcroft. We have now and again tried to train the home-grown talent; but the men who are worth anything will not be dictated to as if they were artisans, they say, and the young ladies are worth nothing. No, Mr. Foxcroft, we cannot afford to offend a client. But in any case, we have no order for painted panels

in a private house just now; and I am sure that the young lady would not care to come among the workmen at one of the hotels. They're a rough lot, those Italians."

"I wonder if you could see your way to let her paint a panel or two on a screen for you," said Chris persistently. "I don't want to urge you, of course; that would be against the best interests of the young lady. You must clearly see that it would be to your advantage to employ her—that's business, as I understand business, Mr. Parr."

"If you will allow me to advise your young friend, Mr. Foxcroft, I would say to her, 'Make use of your own personal friends as far as is possible in this matter,'" said Mr. Parr. "It is surprising how greatly in demand a young lady with a reputation for taste in decoration and in furnishing may become in the course of a short time. Why, there are quite a number of young women in London who make decent incomes, arranging what they call 'schemes of decoration' for those of their friends who wish to be considered very artistic. You would be surprised to see how judiciously they choose the wall-papers—you would really. Personally I am daily surprised at their efforts—they are so well meant. And, after all, Mr. Foxcroft, there are thousands of our fellow-countrymen who live very happily in rooms that are papered—actually papered—with wall papers."

"There are, Mr. Parr—there are: I am one of

them," said Chris cheerily. "Well, I hope that I haven't taken up too much of your time, Mr. Parr. I knew that you would be able to give my friend the best advice possible."

"The best advice you can give the lady is to use up her friends," said Mr. Parr. "It will be time enough to look in another direction when she has exhausted them."

Chris secretly felt, while walking down Bond Street, that Mr. Parr, for all his geniality, was a bit of a cynic. But, for that matter, Chris remembered very clearly giving to a young poet who was not a poet exactly the same advice that Mr. Parr had suggested that he should convey to his young friend who, according to Chris, had aspirations in regard to house decoration. He had told this versifier, who had hoped to find a public to buy an attenuated volume of nerves, that he must trust to his friends to take the edition off his hands; whereat the young man had been hurt, and had even carried his feeling on the subject so far as to withhold his book from publication altogether.

He wondered if Muriel would, on receiving the same advice, withdraw from the struggle with the world. He had more confidence in her staying powers than he had in the young poet's capacity.

By the time he had made up his mind to go to her, Mr. Parr's advice had become so greatly modulated in force as to assume the form, not of the cynical deliverance of a man who had made many

hotels expensive, but of the paternal suggestions of a clear-headed gentleman, who had attained eminence in an exacting profession. In short, there was no cynical bark in Chris's version of his interview with Mr. Parr; and as a consequence Muriel did not feel greatly discouraged.

"Mr. Parr was quite right," she said. "I should never have had the courage to go to him with the suggestion that I should set about the decoration of a room for any of his customers."

"Clients—he calls them clients," said Chris.

"That only places them on a higher basis still," said she. "No, I should never have had the courage to go to so great a personage—it would be like inquiring for the Postmaster General when you only want to buy a halfpenny stamp. But you went, and he gave you good advice, I know. I'll do my best to follow it. I'll make use of all the friends I have in the world."

"I like Mr. Parr's suggestion: it's like trying it on the dog," said Joan. "Curiously enough, it is exactly the same advice as I got from old Gabriella, who taught me all I know about singing. I went to him to ask him how I should get an engagement, and he told me that I could not do better than spend my time singing to my friends until—well, until I had made them my enemies—that's what he said, in effect."

"The fact is quite plain: every one has a horror of the amateur, and no one will look on us as

anything except amateurs," said Muriel. "An amateur is some one who plays at working ; and we shall never be able to convince people that we mean to work, and that the work we can do is as good as that for which people receive a high rate of remuneration, as the newspapers would say."

"I'm afraid that there's some truth in that," said Chris. "Meantime I don't think that you could do better than practise on your friends. Ask Lady Humber if she knows of any nice person who would like her drawing-room decorated with the daintiest Boucher design ever seen outside the Petit Trianon."

But it so happened that Lady Humber was not acquainted with any one who required such refined attention, and Chris went to his newspaper feeling that the position of a girl anxious to do delightful work, and get reasonable payment for it, was even more difficult than he had originally fancied it to be.

CHAPTER XV

LIFE in the best society in London may be described as a great charity competition. It is clearly understood that the easiest way of "getting on" is through the medium of Charity. The amount of money that is spent by people in endeavouring to get money from other people on behalf of certain—well, not necessarily, certain—charities amounts in the aggregate to a much larger sum than they ever succeed in raking in. Society charity means the perpetual throwing of salmon to catch sprats.

But then they get on, and that is everything.

It was generally understood that any one who failed to get on by the help of the war deserved to remain in obscurity for evermore.

People saw that it was their last chance, and clutched at it. Everybody was organising something for the relief of the sufferers, and several reputations were made in the course of a month or two. Women whose names had not been so much as breathed in society for several years before, came jauntily to the front once more, shaking their golden locks as if nothing had happened; actresses who had been out of engagements (at a theatre) flaunted themselves

forward by the side of the fully advertised young woman who had once been engaged to marry a duke ; dramatists who had won a name for themselves by the magnitude and continuity of their failures, ballad mongers who felt that they could be as vulgar and as insolent as the greatest of the race—all this Comus crew crushed themselves to the front of platforms, to the front of cafés chantants which good-natured Royalty graciously attended, to the front of masques, to the front of tableaux vivants and to the front of the innumerable nondescript entertainments given on behalf of the sufferers by the war. No one had any idea how deeply the true spirit of charity permeated society ; and they all had their portraits in the illustrated papers.

Charity suffereth long and is kind.

At first Joan thought that she would be serving the cause of Charity by accepting the invitation of one of her friends, who was the Executive Committee, to sing at the great concert which was being organised for the benefit of some of the many " funds " ; but she soon came to see that she was not wanted in the list of singers. She saw that every singer regarded the others as obstinate intruders, and that her friend, who possessed a surprising but previously unexhibited talent for imitating the mannerisms of a great vocalist, was under the impression that, by permitting the others to sing and play, she had laid them under a debt of gratitude to herself that even the most sanguine could scarcely ever hope to repay.

"I got such a sweet letter from the Duchess of Nethershire only yesterday, offering me Lady Gwendolen and Lady Lillie to sing solos as well as a duet," said she; "but what could I do? I am sure that I have made the duchess an enemy for life by telling her that the programme had been completed. And then there is the Duchess of Cinque Ports—she wrote putting me off a fortnight ago—she thought my concert would not be among the great functions; and now I have good reason to know that she would give the eyes out of her head to have the chance. I have been approached by Lady Avon too—here is her letter: 'I do hope that you will be able to find a nook for my little girl in your programme. A quiet little coon song is what she does best, something with simple'—what's that word?—simple something or other—oh, 'pathos' is the word—what handwriting!—'simple pathos' in it. I think it would be an attraction—it certainly would, I have good reason to know—in a very Exalted Quarter.' You know what she is hinting at!"

"I think I can give a guess," said Joan. "I had no idea that people ever put themselves forward in this way to sing at concerts."

"Put themselves forward?" said the Executive Committee. "Good heavens, child, cannot you see that it is the one chance of their lives? Do you really believe that in this age mothers with daughters on their hands can afford to take a back-seat and fold their arms? Not much. I hear that there has

been no end of heart-burnings over that Louis Seize Watteau Fête Champêtre at the Hyperion Theatre. It appears that Marjory Lincoln, who is, as you know, very tall, insisted on walking up and down in front of the two Bassett girls; so that no one saw them or their tambourines the whole evening. Lady Susan called out 'Shame!' from the wings, quite distinctly. She had staked everything upon the effect she hoped her daughters would make as Dresden shepherdesses. Oh, what a chance I am giving you all!"

Joan began to wish that she had not accepted the invitation to sing at this concert. She had certainly not been conscious of an obligation being conferred upon her, though she now saw clearly how, looked at from the point of view of the Executive Committee and the duchesses' daughters, the concert offered her a chance.

She sang, however, when the day came, and she knew that she was as far superior to the group of well-taught amateurs on the platform beside her as Madame Melba was superior to herself. The people who had paid money for tickets—all except such as had relatives performing—seemed to have no trouble in recognising her capacity compared with that of the others, for they applauded her until they were tired.

The other performers were a trifle tired also.

Before she left the hall she met several of her friends—ladies in society—and one of them, who

had been sitting beside Lady Humber and Muriel, said,

"They tell me that you are going to amuse yourself by taking to singing as a profession."

"I am not sure that I shall be greatly amused," said Joan, "but anyhow I mean to try to get engagements as a vocalist."

"Not on the stage, of course, my dear," said the lady.

"Oh, no ; I am not nearly good enough for the stage," replied Joan. "No, I should like to begin in a small way—'at homes'—small concerts. I could work my way up."

"I am sure you could," said the lady encouragingly. "I am giving a little reception next Wednesday, and I should be very glad if your engagements permitted of your singing for us. I feel, my dear, that you are very brave—very courageous, I might even say. You deserve to be encouraged, and I should regard it as a great privilege to be allowed to offer you a helping hand. I do hope that you will be able to come on Wednesday."

Joan felt greatly pleased, and she did not resent the somewhat patronising attitude and tone of the lady. She knew that the patrons of a charity are those ladies who evade payment ; but here was a lady who was willing to pay ; so that she was certainly better entitled than any one to assume the harmless rôle of patron.

"I shall book myself for next Wednesday, and

"thank you very much for your helping hand," she said, in quite a businesslike way.

"I am sure that I am quite delighted," said the lady.

"My foot is on the first rung of the ladder," cried Joan when she was with Muriel and Lady Humber in the latter's brougham. "Yes, I feel that our fortune is made: I have nothing to do except to climb."

"You see there is a great deal of sense in Mr. Parr's advice to use up our friends, though we may have laughed at it at the time," said Muriel. "I only wish that we knew some one who wanted a room painted."

"That will come in good time," said Joan. "You see, the business of house decoration is not like singing: if you could only get a couple of thousand people into a hall and then shout out that you will be pleased to decorate their rooms at so much a square foot, you would be all right. The value of singing is that you can shout into the people's ears that you are a singer."

"A good many young women shout out that they are not singers," said Lady Humber, who now and again ventured to make a remark in the presence of her tall nieces.

It so happened, however, that before the end of the week, in spite of the limitations of her means of advertising her business, Muriel had received an order to beautify a boudoir at the residence of a wealthy widow, to whom Lady Humber had com-

municated the fact that Miss Selwood had taken up the beautifying of "interiors" as a profession.

"How interesting and how brave of her!" cried this lady, whose name was Mrs. Kirke—her husband had made a large fortune by advertising a drug of great innocuousness. "The girls of nowadays show a most admirable spirit of independence, and deserve to be encouraged. Long ago, when I was young, that foolish notion prevailed that it was un-genteel for a girl to be otherwise than helpless."

"I remember the time very well," said Lady Humber. "The word 'genteel' was distinctly a word of that period. We worked antimacassars."

"Precisely. Yes. I do remember the antimacassar—a thing called crochet, if I remember right—or was it tatting? Never mind. We have every reason to rejoice that we have lived to see this day when things are so different," said Mrs. Kirke. "I feel that it is a pleasure as well as a duty to encourage such efforts at independence as you are making, Miss Selwood, and if you think it would be a help to you, I should be very pleased to ask you to put a finishing touch to a little room which I have just had fitted up for myself—a snugger, I call it—it might, of course, be dignified by the name of a boudoir."

"You are really too kind," said Muriel. "I should like above all things starting upon such a room. I'm rather afraid of attacking a big drawing-room at first."

"Of course one must walk before one runs, and I hope that you will find my little room good practice for you," said Mrs. Kirke, with scarcely a suspicion of the patron in her bearing.

"The world is full of kind people," said Muriel, when she had gone away, after making an appointment for an early day on which she was to inspect the "objective" of her operations. "It is really only adversity that shows us how true are our friends. Mr. Parr is a man of the world."

"And we had read so often in books that friends are merely fair-weather incidents, like butterflies," said Joan. "We are gaining experience of the fallacies of the teaching of long ago. I really was of the belief that as soon as it became known that we had to work for our living, we should find ourselves deserted by our friends. Mrs. Kirke was the merest acquaintance, and yet you see how heartily she is throwing herself into our struggle. She is a dear old thing."

On the appointed day these two exponents of the new philosophy of friendship went to the "dear old thing's house" which was situated at Bayswater, and had the privilege of inspecting one of the most foolishly furnished houses they had ever entered. They had looked for the commonplace, but they had not expected to find such examples of upholsterer's tastelessness.

And everything was so shockingly modern. The imitation old oak in the dining-room, the "Early

English" mahogany drawing-rooms with the fussy inlaid cupboards and cabinets and drapers' Japanese ornaments, conveyed the impression of an attempt to reproduce the lower end of Tottenham Court Road, in the manner in which bazaar people reproduce their "Streets of Olde London." To go from room to room under the guidance of Mrs. Kirke was positively like turning over the leaves of an illustrated catalogue of a second-class house-furnisher.

The girls found much that they could conscientiously refrain from admiring; but the breadth of the staircase called for their hearty expression of approval, and Mrs. Kirke perceived that they knew what they were talking about. They found her new boudoir very snug, and said so much. The walls were papered, but the paper was inoffensive and the carpet was guardedly neutral. The chimney-piece was a charming copy of an old French design, done in white *pâte*, and in the portion alluded to by Mrs. Kirke as the "overmantel," there was an oval space which Muriel at once saw should be filled up with one of her designs of Clouds and Cupids.

"That is just what the architect who got the chimney-piece for me said. He is a young man, and I am anxious to encourage him," said Mrs. Kirke. "My idea was to have a mirror in the space; a mirror is, of course, the natural thing to have over a mantelpiece; but he said, 'No, it must be a picture.' I leave the design to your own taste, Miss Selwood. I know that your own good taste will

prevent you from doing anything that is not in keeping with the general tone of morality in my house."

"Morality?" said Muriel.

"I mean, you know, I could not have anything that was not fully clothed," said Mrs. Kirke. "I have seen some things in public galleries that absolutely shocked me. Of course it doesn't matter so much in a public gallery, but a private house should be beyond suspicion; and a widow cannot really be too circumspect."

"I quite agree with you," said Muriel. "One cannot be too careful. But I think you may leave the design to my own taste, Mrs. Kirke. And what about the door? I see that the architect has left an oval space in the ornament above the door."

"Yes, he laid great stress on' the overdoor," said Mrs. Kirke. "He said it must have a picture also. I thought it looked well enough just as it is: the paper that shows through the oval could hardly be improved upon."

"I think that possibly a picture would brighten it up," said Muriel.

"Then I suppose I must let you have your own way," said the lady. "I think it right to encourage so praiseworthy a spirit of independence as you are displaying, Miss Selwood. I shall not interfere with you in any way, and I am sure that—that—you will make a good job of it."

It was Joan and not Muriel, who gave a laugh at the sudden transition from the phrasology of the patron

to the optimism of the tradesman. She hoped that Miss Selwood would "make a good job of it," and so the interview ended.

"My foot is also on the first rung of the ladder," cried Muriel.

And Chris, when he heard how wealthy was Mrs. Kirke, cordially agreed with her, and even ventured to make some remarks on the ethics of dealings with the very wealthy.

"I think it would be unwise for you to ask any extravagant price for this work, just because Mrs. Kirke is so well off," said he. "Of course, we all know that you will do the work as well as it would be done by any of Mr. Parr's Italian artists, and Mr. Parr would make a charge for it of perhaps a couple of hundred pounds—most likely guineas; he has clients, not customers. But you need not hope to get Parr's prices all at once. We must encourage trade."

"That is exactly my opinion," said Muriel. "Why should I charge the same price as Mr. Parr, considering that I have not the fame of a world-wide advertiser?"

"The mistake most girls make, I found out long ago when I was investigating the whole question, lies in their placing a fictitious value on their work," said Chris. "They know what prices the middleman gets, and they think they should get the same. It is the same way with some artists and the dealers. Because a dealer can get a couple of hundred pounds

for one of their pictures, though he only gives them fifty pounds for it, they have no hesitation in pronouncing all dealers to be swindlers. We must encourage an unwilling public to buy our wares. Of course, when we have become the fashion—that is to say, when we have become indispensable—we can charge anything we please ; meantime, however, we must be modest.”

“ We must be modest,” said Muriel.

“ That is the very sentiment about which Mrs. Kirke gave Muriel the most implicit instructions,” said Joan. “ She stipulated that there was to be no immodesty about the pictures.”

“ She made herself quite intelligible to me,” laughed Muriel. “ She only meant that she preferred Watteau Shepherdesses to Boucher Cupids.”

“ She did not express her meaning in very graceful language,” said Chris.

“ Beggars cannot be choosers,” said Muriel. “ I am expected to supply in my pictures the gracefulness which is missing in the Kirke *ménage* ”

CHAPTER XVI

IT was quite delightful, this feeling that they had at last made a start in working for a living, and both the girls felt that much of their success in getting so good a start was due to Chris. Muriel said that it was really quite lucky that Mr. Meadows had thought it well to keep him at home, though she was sure that Chris felt greatly disappointed at not being allowed to go to the front.

Joan only said that Chris was the best fellow in the world, and that good old Forrester, the veteran war correspondent, might be able to send his second son to Harrow if the campaign only lasted a reasonable time. She returned to her piano and renewed her endeavours to give point to that form of composition known as the "coon song," which, by special request of her employer—it was business-like to refer to the lady as her employer—she was to interpret to such persons as were fortunate enough to be invited to the reception.

She had no difficulty in perceiving that the coon song as a medium of vocal expression has its limitations, the most conspicuous being in regard to sensibility. She thought the specimen which had

been chosen for her must have been an exceptionally unfavourable one ; for it seemed to her educated ear no more worthy of being taken seriously than the drone of an Italian bagpipe, which it greatly resembled in tone. The fact that it was no worse than this would be sufficient to prove to any coon song expert either that she was a singularly lenient critic or that the specimen which she had received was an exceptionally good one—so good indeed as to have little of the coon song about it.

It was a dreary drone of melodious negation. People said it was the simple musical expression of the plantation. They did not say which plantation they meant, but the other people said, "Quite so—that is exactly how to express it."

And so it became the fashion of an hour, and the plantation at West Kensington could scarcely turn out sufficient coon songs to meet the public demand. The khaki song was another form of composition which every one thought was going to have a long day. Unfortunately, it did not survive the first series of British reverses. It was dead before Lady-smith was relieved

"Beggars cannot be choosers," said Joan, when Chris ventured to say that he thought the coon song somewhat idiotic. "My employer chose the thing, and it would be as much as my situation is worth for me to say a word against it. 'Theirs not to make reply—theirs not to reason why—theirs but to—to rake in the dollars ;' and that's what I mean to do."

"True," said Chris; "it is the inalienable privilege of the one who pays the piper to name the tune. By the way, you both seem to have become tolerably mercenary. Let me venture to express the hope that you will not place an extravagant price upon your vocalism. Of course, I know that you are entitled to charge a little extra for singing such stuff as that thing about the 'lubbly moon,' and the 'month ob Joon,' and the 'loon' and the 'croon' and all the rest of it, but you mustn't overcharge your employer."

"You gave Muriel the same excellent advice, and I assure you that we have both taken it to heart," said Joan. "Oh, no, Chris dear; if Muriel remembers that she is not Alma Tadema, I shall never believe that I am Melba—what's more, I don't believe that more than half a dozen in my audience will be deluded into such a belief."

But beyond a doubt she did her best for the thing when she came to sing it. She perceived that it aimed at being quaint and she gave a quaint twist to her singing of it. She fooled with the thing and her fooling almost took away from its foolishness. She made sudden pauses in the drone and people wiped their eyes. There is no pathos like the simple pathos of the plantation, they said; and when she romped ahead, without having any reason to do so beyond her wish to be quaint, people became merry and said she knew exactly how to interpret the simple croon of the cotton field.

She sang a second song—a real song this time, and people applauded her ; but their hearts were hankering after the coon song.

The most solid form of appreciation that she received, however, took the form of two other engagements to sing in the course of the following week.

"Mrs. Brooke tells me that you are taking up singing as a profession, Miss Selwood," said Lady Hiltonwick. "We all think it so brave of you—so very brave indeed ; and we shall all do our best to help you, if you will allow us. I do hope that you will allow us. I have a little gathering on Friday week, and it would be so good of you if you would agree to come to us ; any time after nine-thirty."

"You are more than kind ; I shall be very glad indeed," said Joan. "Would you like three songs, or would two be sufficient ?"

"Oh, if you could see your way to give us three we should all be delighted—two of them of the same type as that dear quaint thing about the negro," said Lady Hiltonwick. "I feel, my dear Miss Selwood, that it is quite a privilege to be able to do anything to advance your interests."

"It is quite a pleasant duty," said Mrs. Beitmeyer, who was standing by. Mrs. Beitmeyer was a distinguished patron of the arts : Mr. Beitmeyer was said to be the best judge of Old Masters in London ; he had made a much better thing out of Old Masters than the Old Masters had ever done. "It is quite

a pleasant duty to do something to help forward the good cause of woman's emancipation. If all young women were but to show the same spirit of self-reliance that you have displayed, Miss Selwood—the same spirit of independence, so to speak—we should have fewer drones in our hive and men would not have it all their own way.”

Joan merely smiled at these cryptic axioms—she was doing her best to cultivate (for business purposes) the smile of the dependent. That was what her independence amounted to ; she had never before felt so dependent as she did while these people were congratulating her on her independence.

“If I can do anything for you, my dear Miss Selwood, you may depend on my leaving no stone unturned,” said another of Mrs. Brooke's guests—she was a Lady Mackail, and she spoke with a Scotch inflection. “Oh, yes ; it is a duty—almost a sacred duty. I have a small gathering on the twenty-second, and if you could make it convenient to give us a couple of songs—simple old Scots ballads, dear, are good enough for us, and in my poor opinion they're good enough for the best—we would be greatly gratified.”

“You are more than kind, indeed,” said Joan. “I shall book myself for the twenty-second, and I hope that I may be able to do justice to some of those lovely old Scotch ballads.”

“They need a deal of expression,” said Lady Mackail solemnly. “The beautiful sentiment is not

visible pronounced 'veesible' unless you throw a deal of expression into its delivery; but we'll not be hard on you at the start. Try yourself on 'The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond,' and 'Comin' thro' the Rye.' But don't forget the expression"

"I'll take special care to bring it with me," said Joan with a little laugh: she thought that even a dependent might indulge in the luxury of a laugh, provided that it was a little one and unobtrusive. Lady Mackail did not respond, however; she pursed out her lips slightly and became severe. Joan felt that she must be more careful in her demeanour in future. She had not as yet completely mastered the rôle of the independent young woman.

Anyhow, she had obtained two new engagements to sing, and she felt that that was business.

"It seems that these At Homes have something of the snowball about them," she cried when she was telling Muriel and Lady Humber about her success. "To sing at one brings an offer to sing at two others; now if each of these two others brings two more, I think I shall have no reason to be dissatisfied."

She then hastened to find out how the two Scotch ballads should be treated, and she soon came to the conclusion that they required a great deal of expression to be imparted to them in order to make their deep feeling apparent. Chris, who had seen strong men wiping their eyes after the singing of "The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond" at the close of

a St. Andrew's night dinner, was able to give her several useful hints ; for the profound pathos of the sentiment

“Ye'll tak the high road, but I'll tak the low road,”

was not immediately apparent to her : she gave it as her opinion that there was just as much pathos in some one's saying, “You'll take the Waterloo line, but I'll go from Charing Cross.” He had no trouble in showing her that this was just where everything was dependent on the expression of the vocalist. He taught her how she must allow her voice to gather tears as it crept along, and how, on coming to the touching lines of the chorus, she must pause, giving her head the least little pathetic shake while her voice shook sympathetically. This was the way to make an audience (of North Britons) appreciate the touching elements of the lyric.

“If you let people see that you feel what you are singing, depend upon it you have gone very far in making them feel it too,” said Chris ; and she had a vague instinct that he had just defined the secret of success in other arts besides the art of singing. The key to all arts is the art of making people believe that you believe in yourself.

And all the time that Joan was practising her songs, Muriel was painting away at her pictures in a room at the top of the house, and the result of her work was highly satisfactory. She did not trouble herself with many colours, or a crowd of

figures. The picture for the oval above the mantelpiece showed a gentleman in eighteenth-century dress leading out to the first movement of the minuet a lady in eighteenth-century dress. The tones were delicate and subdued, and there was no definite background. In the one for the scroll work above the door a couple of children, fully draped, were weaving a chain of pink roses, while butterflies hovered over their heads.

Chris had also a word to say regarding these designs, but it was only a word of regret that they were not to find a place within a more congenial environment than they would have in Mrs. Kirke's boudoir.

Muriel tried to assume the cynicism of the artist as she said,

"My dear Chris, Mrs. Kirke's money will ring just as pleasantly as the money of the most appreciative person in the world. I do not insist on getting a certificate of appreciation from my customers. Mrs. Kirke's cheque will be gladly accepted by me instead of any guarantee of artistic sensitiveness on her part."

But when, after the lapse of three weeks, the pictures were sent home, and Muriel saw that they were properly fitted in the places for which they were designed, Mrs. Kirke proved very distinctly that she was capable of appreciating such charming works. She declared that she considered them altogether lovely, and quite in keeping with the

artistic feeling of the room. In addition, they were quite in harmony with the wall paper, she said ; and this, she had feared, was the rock upon which Miss Selwood would wreck her prospect of success.

“ I chose the paper so carefully,” she explained.

And then she insisted on the artist and her sister staying to tea, and she gave them to understand that she was not like that class of person who fancied that she detracted from her own position by admitting her employés on terms of perfect equality to her drawing-room. She added that, no matter what anyone might say, she, for her own part, could not but think that it was very brave indeed of Miss Selwood to set about working as she had done, and it was a duty to encourage her in her aim after independence.

It was on that same evening that Joan sang at Lady Mackail's reception, and she certainly could not complain of the way in which her singing of the two Scotch ballads was appreciated. Strong men wiped their eyes when she gave that little significant head-shake as her voice dwelt on the touching words :

“ Ye'll tak the high road, but I'll tak the low road ” ; and before she left the house she had been engaged to contribute the same songs to a reception which a certain Lady Ian Brecknock was about to give at her house at Richmond, and also at Lady Bannockburn's party to celebrate her silver wedding.

She left Lady Mackail's mansion in high spirits, feeling that she had made an undoubted success, and that her future was safe ; for she reflected upon

the fact that these people were not the immediate friends of her family ; they were no more than acquaintances who had been introduced by Lady Humber. When she would begin to "tap" her own friends she would naturally be busier still. But on the whole she felt that it was much better for her to begin her career as she had begun it—it was so much more businesslike. She had heard—contrary to what Mr. Parr had said—that business and friendship should be kept strictly apart.

And then, to add to her feelings of confidence, there came the joyful news of success in South Africa. Kimberley was relieved, and one of the relieving force was Colonel Selwood ; Ladysmith was relieved, and one of the garrison was Smeaton Selwood, and the army of an unscrupulous leader had surrendered.

The gloom which had been hanging over the country for months was suddenly lifted, and it seemed as if the British Empire had managed to secure a renewal of the lease of the territory which some people had fancied was about to slip from its hands. In a moment the gloom of grim defiance which had been hanging over the people gave place to a feeling of something more than relief. Men shook each other by the hand. There was cheering in some of the streets where cheering had never before been heard, and in the greatest thoroughfares in the world, traffic was interrupted while business men made fools of themselves, without attracting any special attention ; for there seemed to be no

reason why men wearing shining silk hats should not smash the hats of their fellow-men, and then submit with good grace to the smashing in of their own hats—there seemed to be no reason why sober men should not blow penny trumpets and wave penny Union Jacks all day long.

It was the strangest day that London had known for over a century, and it came to an end with illuminations and the anthem of "God Save the Queen!" The country had awakened from a detestable dream, and when the Chancellor of the Exchequer—a man devoid of imagination and destitute of resource—asked for thirty millions on account of the war, he was offered three hundred and sixty millions.

The people looked on the money as the ordinary fine which is paid on the renewal of a lease, and they felt that they had renewed the lease of the British Empire.

CHAPTER XVII

IT was rather surprising to Muriel to find that Mrs. Kirke, though the widow of a well-known business man, was so deficient in business habits as to allow a week to pass without writing to inquire what should be the amount of the cheque she should send to the artist who had done some work of decoration to her boudoir. But when a fortnight had passed and no inquiry whatever had been made by Mrs. Kirke, the artist began to feel irritated.

She wondered if Mrs. Kirke was in the habit of treating her butcher or her baker or her greengrocer with the same irregularity ; but she felt that it would be odious to write to her for a cheque—it seemed to Muriel to be as odious as asking her for the loan of some money. But Lady Humber had no feeling of this sort. She had become, by years of unscrupulous toil, the absolute head of the Charity Bazaar industry in London, so that long years had gone by since she had had a flutter before applying to any one for money—even the merest stranger.

“If she doesn’t understand that business is business she must be taught,” said Lady Humber,

opening her desk. "What is she to send you for your pictures?"

But that was just the question which Muriel could not answer at a moment's notice. It was she who had been unbusinesslike in the first instance in not striking a bargain with Mrs. Kirke in regard to the price of the pictures; but surely it was Mrs. Kirke's place to inquire what the price of the pictures would be before ordering them. She had simply ordered them as she would order an ornament at her jeweller's. Surely it is not the place of a jeweller to announce the price of an article, when no inquiry on the subject is made by his customer.

"Well, what shall we say, now that we are sending in the bill?" asked Lady Humber.

Muriel became thoughtful.

"You see, I never sold a picture before and so I don't quite know what sum I should name," she said. "I suppose a real artist would charge eighty or a hundred guineas for the two; but, of course, I am different. I would not like to give Mrs. Kirke the idea that I am trying to get the uttermost penny out of her."

"What does it matter whether or not you give her that idea?" said Lady Humber. It had come to her knowledge pretty frequently that that was just what people said about herself when she was running a rickety bazaar on the forced draught principle, so that she spoke with authority; it didn't matter anything to her that she had been called

extortionate. "Let her say anything she pleases about you; you will have her money. Shall I put the pictures down at fifty guineas?"

"That is too much for a beginner," said Muriel. "Suppose we say twenty—she cannot grumble at twenty?"

"The woman that would grumble at fifty would be much more likely to grumble at twenty," said Lady Humber. "However, it's your transaction, not mine. There; I've said twenty guineas. If she sends a cheque for pounds I'll return it to her."

Muriel felt that it was taking an extreme step in applying boldly for the payment for her first commission, and she sincerely hoped that Mrs. Kirke's sensitiveness would not suffer a shock thereby; she was very sensitive in regard to other people's sensitiveness; but when Mrs. Kirke's letter was received in reply to Lady Humber's suggestion that the sending of a cheque to Miss Selwood had been entrusted to Mrs. Kirke's business man who had omitted to carry out his instructions, Muriel's alarm for the lady's sensitiveness subsided.

Mrs. Kirke expressed her great surprise that Miss Selwood meant to make a charge for the little pictures. She quite understood that the pictures had been painted as a sort of private advertisement for Miss Selwood's own benefit.

"I really thought that the advantage of having two of her little sketches hung in my boudoir, where my visitors would see them daily, was fully appre-

ciated by Miss Selwood," she wrote. "I meant sincerely to do my best to encourage Miss Selwood in her brave and laudable enterprise, and I even mentioned the name of my dressmaker to your niece. As, however, Miss Selwood seems to have misunderstood my motives, and not wishing to be thought niggardly to a young lady of good birth and education, I enclose her a cheque for five pounds."

Muriel read the letter and turned first red and then white.

"Send her back her cheque," she said.

But her aunt was already half-way down the first sheet of a letter which she was writing with great fluency.

"Oh, yes, I'll send her back her cheque for five pounds," she said. "But if she fancies that she will succeed in evading payment of a just debt—a debt that she knows to be quite reasonable—I think I can convince her that she makes a mistake."

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear aunt," said Muriel. "I lack the faculty to haggle with such people. Let her have the pictures and the cheque—the cheque for five pounds—as well."

"I possess the haggling faculty, my dear," said Lady Humber, "and I mean to haggle twenty guineas out of that—that—skinflint. The matter has now passed out of your hands into mine. It is my honour that is trembling in the balance. You shall have your cheque for twenty guineas—if she makes it pounds I'll send it back—by to-morrow evening."

"I don't want the woman's money," said Muriel.

"Don't interrupt me—a threatening letter should be written with care. 'My dear Mrs. Kirke—so sorry—a misunderstanding—artistic feeling—kindly cross cheque "Coutts"—hope your name may remain on list of patronesses of the White Lodge Fancy Fair. I hear that Lady de Crecy is more than anxious to get her name on the list. I have promised her the first vacancy. It rests with you to say by next post if there will be a vacancy on the list. Ever yours most sincerely, Mildred V. Humber.' That's my letter to that—that—skinflint," said Lady Humber. "Thank Heaven that I possess the means of keeping the fear of man if not the fear of God before the eyes of such as she."

"If she is determined to skin a flint you mean to have a word to say regarding the disposal of the pelt," said Joan, who had been a silent, and therefore a thoughtful, witness of the exposure of Mrs. Kirke's character.

"I have it in my power to shut her out from every work of charity in the future, beginning with the White Lodge Fancy Fair," said Lady Humber, "and she knows it. She also knows that if her name is cut off from every list of charity patronesses, she becomes the merest nonentity. There are dozens of women who keep their place in society solely by their connection with the charities of society. You'll get your cheque, Muriel, never fear."

"I have lost all interest in the cheque," said Muriel.

But she got it the next day, by the earliest possible post, and with it quite a nice letter from Mrs. Kirke—a letter which was, as Joan suggested, framed on the model of a testimonial sent, "entirely without solicitation," to the advertisers of certain patent medicines. It certified to the excellent effect produced by Miss Selwood's pictures in Mrs. Kirke's boudoir, and expressed the hope that Miss Selwood's spirit in seeking to become independent might meet with the amplest reward at the hands of the public.

This transaction had rather a solemnising effect upon Joan. It caused her to recollect that she had not yet received a single penny from any of the ladies at whose receptions she had sung. Without saying a word to her aunt, she straightway sat down to her desk and wrote business-like letters to Mrs. Brooke, Lady Hiltonwick, and Lady Mackail, asking each of them to have the goodness to send her a cheque for ten guineas—she made up her mind that ten guineas was the minimum sum that she could accept, without forfeiting her self-respect—for singing the coon songs, and the other rubbish which her patronesses had insisted on. She explained very graciously that it would never do for her to keep accounts, the effect being so very distracting to any one situated as she was.

She received replies almost immediately from Mrs. Brooke and Lady Mackail. This was Mrs. Brooke's letter :—

"DEAR MISS SELWOOD,—I must confess I am rather surprised to get an application from you for ten guineas for singing at my little At Home. I thought that you were anxious to get a hearing and that you fully appreciated the excellent opportunity my At Home offered you of displaying your undoubted capacity. That I did not take too extravagant a view of the advantages that would accrue to you is proved by the fact of your being engaged, before you left my house, by Lady Hiltonwick and Lady Mackail. Surely it would be unreasonable for you to expect me to pay you in addition to advertising you. Did I not also give you the name of my milliner?

"Very sincerely yours,
"ELEONORA BROOKE."

And this was Lady Mackail's letter :

"DEAR MISS SELWOOD,—Sir Donald and I are more than surprised—we are greatly pained that you should be under the impression that we were in your debt : to tell you the truth, we thought that it was just the other way about—that you considered yourself beholden to us for the opportunity we freely gave you of making yourself known to our guests as a vocalist. I ask you candidly if it is true or not that you received no less than two engagements for future dates under my roof? Sir Donald does not wish to be thought illiberal, so though he does not admit that you have any claim upon us, he encloses

a cheque for ten shillings (10s.); but he hopes that you will treat this as confidential, for were it to become known that we were in the habit of paying away money recklessly, the consequences might be embarrassing to our household.

“Yours most truly,

“JEANIE MACKAIL.”

“P.S.—I enclose you the card of an excellent but inexpensive dressmaker.”

And this is the letter which was received by the same post by Lady Humber from Lady Hiltonwick :

“DEAR LADY HUMBER,—If your niece fails to obtain recognition as an artiste, it will not be for any lack of enterprise on her part. I am sure that it was without your knowledge that she sent me the absurd application (enclosed) for money. Of course you know as well as I that dozens of recognised vocalists would only be too happy to have such a chance of advertising themselves as I was generous enough—I fear that I must now say, *foolish* enough—to offer to your niece. I may also mention that I gave her the address of my own tailor.

“Believe me, yours very sincerely,

“GEORGIANA OLIVETTE HILTONWICK.”

There was a *conseil de famille* that same evening in Lady Humber's drawing-room.

Chris Foxcroft took a leading part in it. The two young women, having some hours previously dried their eyes with great pertinacity, spoke out of the hardness of their hearts, and announced their intention of abandoning all claim to the money that they had earned in their first attempt to achieve independence.

But Lady Humber and Chris had something to say on this matter.

Unfortunately none of the other ladies was as susceptible as Mrs. Kirke to the force of the threat of being cut off from all connection with works of charity, so that Lady Humber could only suggest an application to the County Court for redress of the wrongs of her niece, and neither of the nieces would consent to the adoption of so drastic a remedy as this. But Chris was a man of many resources.

"I have often heard of the petty meanness of these good folk," he said. "I have heard of one *grande dame* who wrote a friendly letter to Monomime, the entertainer, telling him that she had a children's party one evening, and asking him if he would mind dropping in—the house was in Park Lane—to make the little ones laugh. Of course he wrote to say that he would be delighted to do so, and he kept his word and found about a hundred and fifty young people between the ages of nineteen and seventy-five waiting to be entertained by him gratis ; not a child was visible above the horizon."

"If they can do that sort of thing with Mr.

Monomime in Park Lane, I cannot complain if they do it with me in Bayswater," said Joan.

"I have heard of duchesses who get all the artists in London to take part in their charity performances, and they get all the praise for their charity and not a word is said about the artists," continued Chris.

"The artists are fools," cried Muriel.

"Only now and again does one hear of the meanness of the great ones, and then it is made manifest through the medium of the County Court," resumed Chris. "You heard of the widow of a Cabinet Minister—the sister-in-law of a duke—who got a hat on approval from a milliner and told her own maid to copy it exactly, and then returned the article with the message that it did not suit. The County Court settled that little matter. Now I am quite glad to have a chance of exposing the meanness of such creatures as this Mackail body and that Lady Hiltonwick. Only I am afraid they will never allow the matter to get into the reportable stage."

"We will take very good care of that," said Joan.

"We do not want their money."

"They take all of these points into consideration in perpetrating their shabbiness," said Lady Humber. "They think it extremely unlikely that a young lady would fight them in public, and therefore they have made the swindling of such as you a fine art."

"Now," said Chris, "you must sit down, my dear Joan, and write in the third person to every one of

these ladies, saying to her that if you do not receive a cheque for ten guineas by next Saturday, you will instruct your solicitor to apply to her through the County Court. Meanwhile I shall get a friend of mine who edits *Masks and Faces* to put in a paragraph that will frighten the life out of the delinquents. *Masks and Faces* does a great deal of good in a humble way by means of veiled threats and delicate allusions. It is a great pity that more papers do not make a move in the same direction."

"I'll write the letters you suggest, but nothing will tempt me to appear in a witness box," said Joan. "Shall I give them till Saturday or Monday?"

"Better say Monday. That will allow of their seeing Saturday's *Masks and Faces* and also of their going to church over the business. All these people go to church and have a reputation for being devout. If they read *Masks and Faces* on Saturday you may take it for granted that they will think over the paragraph they see in its pages while attending Divine Service on Sunday."

Joan felt that amount of satisfaction which the writing of a letter in the third person usually imparts to a young woman, while now and again ensnaring her grammar. She begged leave to inform Lady Mackail and the rest that if she, Miss Joan Selwood, did not receive a cheque for ten guineas by the following Monday evening, she, Miss Joan Selwood, would be compelled to ask her, Miss Joan Selwood's, solicitor, to apply for it.

And in the Saturday's issue of *Masks and Faces*, that piquant print which everybody detests—and reads, there appeared a short note promising its readers some entertainment at no distant date, in regard to the way in which some ladies attempted to evade paying those artists whom they are in the habit of engaging to dissipate the natural dulness of their receptions.

“It will be left for the County Court Judge to decide if a cup of tea and a recommendation to a milliner constitute a reasonable settlement of the claims of a vocalist who has been formally engaged to sing certain lyrics prescribed by the generous hostess for the entertainment of her guests,” said the paragraph. “Additional piquancy will undoubtedly attach to the proceedings by the appearance in the box of a well-known modiste to give evidence regarding the commission claimed by some ladies in Society for acting as her touts.”

On the Monday afternoon Miss Joan Selwood received three cheques for ten guineas each, accompanied in every case by a brief note written in the third person.

The same post brought Miss Selwood a letter from Mr. Vickers, acquainting her with the fact that he had found the fool who, his cynical optimism had told him to hope, might eventually appear.

Only Mr. Vickers referred to him as a possible lessee of Selwood.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE girls looked at each other and laughed.

"He has turned up at the psychological moment," said Muriel. "Between us we have made fifty pounds—that is inside two months, and at a time when business is very bad, owing to the war. Now fifty pounds in two months is three hundred a year—three hundred guineas a year. There's not much to grumble at in that."

"No; the only thing is that I fear we have exhausted our market," said Joan. "But even if we found that we had, I have still a trick up my sleeve. Never mind; no one will be able to say that we merely played at working for our living. We did the thing seriously, and we have, at least, learned something of the world by the experiment."

"I don't feel inclined to relinquish my work even if Selwood is let," said Muriel after a pause. "Though I suppose that people would consider us ridiculous were we to continue to search for work."

"We might be accused of taking the bread out of other people's mouths," said Joan. "Oh, my dear girl, I frankly confess that I haven't yet discovered the ennobling influence of working for a living, and I

for one will be delighted to eat the bread of idleness once again. People talk of independence—I should like to know where the independence comes in. To be dependent upon the whims of old women such as Mrs. Kirke and Lady Mackail scarcely represents the ideal independence of the rhetorician.”

“It’s discipline,” said Muriel.

“That doesn’t bring it a bit closer to an ideal,” said Joan. “The Gregory’s powders which we were dosed with when we were children may have been discipline, but they were not the less nasty to take on that account. No, my dear, I frankly acknowledge that working for a living is horrid. I don’t think that I would shrink from it if the necessity arose, but I hope with all my heart that we shall secure the tenant and so be saved the necessity. I cordially agree with the sentiment of the tramp on the roadside who begged for a sixpence to save him from the most terrible misfortune that could happen to him, and who on being pressed to define the possible misfortune, said ‘having to work.’”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Muriel. “There are some things that are a good deal worse than work—living on borrowed money, for instance.”

“We agreed upon that long ago,” said Joan. “No, whatever comes to us we shall not mortgage our self-respect.”

Muriel wrote to Chris and then to Mr. Vickers, making an appointment with him for the next day, and they all drove together to Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

Mr. Vickers was not outwardly jubilant, but now and again there appeared a gleam in his eyes such as may be noticed—by careful observers—in the eyes of a general when he finds that the enemy has walked into the trap which he has laid. He felt like a successful commander ; and that was probably why, immediately after the entrance of his visitors, he dwelt upon some phases of the South African campaign, congratulating the girls upon the mention of their brother's name not only in the despatches of the Head of the Defenders of Ladysmith, but also by the newspaper correspondents. He did not attach a great deal of importance to anything that the military commanders might say, but to be named in a newspaper despatch was a proof that there was something in the young officer of artillery. He had Napoleon in his mind—was not Napoleon an artillery officer? he asked.

“We have seen Rôjane in ‘Madame Sans-Gêne,’ and think her very fine indeed, and we were delighted to get your letter yesterday, Mr. Vickers,” said Joan, with startling want of sequence. “You really think that we have some chance of letting the place without the need for paying any one for keeping it?”

Mr. Vickers had a good deal to say still about the generalship displayed in the operations in South Africa—he had only touched upon the way Smeaton Selwood had distinguished himself; he had not yet dealt with Colonel Selwood and the splendid work

done by Firebrace—Firebrace the invincible—but Joan's want of sequence had startled him out of his conversational preface.

"I think I mentioned long ago that there was a possibility of a tenant being found for Selwood," he said.

"Yes; you agreed with us that the world was full of fools," said Joan.

"Did I put it in that way? I trust not," said he. "My dear young lady, no man who has fifty or sixty thousand a year can be thought of as a fool."

"I suppose not; he buys himself out of the ranks, so to speak," said Joan. "Well, Mr. Vickers, what does your tenant propose to pay us for the privilege of maintaining our house in its accustomed splendour? And pray, is he the brewer whom you had in your mind's eye or the diamond-man from South Africa?"

Mr. Vickers consulted the papers which he had docketed in front of him.

"We have had some correspondence," said he. "Of course, as you are aware, a delicate matter such as this cannot be negotiated too cautiously. I was approached on the subject by one of the gentleman's agents a few weeks ago, and we went together into some of the incidental questions connected with the responsibilities of the tenancy—the maintaining of the ornamental grounds, and the employés on the estate—the dilapidations—we submit that the place is in good habitable repair at

the present moment. It would not suit us, I am sure you understand, to spend any considerable sum of money simply for the sake of securing a five-year tenant?"

"No, unless the sum spent were added on to the yearly rent, and so repaid during the term of tenancy," said Chris.

"Quite so," said Mr. Vickers, and the girls nodded acquiescence. They felt that the business was getting too deep for them. They wished they could jostle Mr. Vickers on to figures. How much was the tenant willing to pay in the way of rent? "The question of reasonable dilapidations consequent upon a short tenancy is always a nice matter. But we have our surveyors. The difficulty can be bridged. I am afraid in the case of antique furniture an understanding may not be so easily arrived at. However, these are, after all, secondary matters—more important is the question of the unlet farms. It occurred to me that if we could combine the letting of the mansion with the letting of, say, Drellincourt Farm, it would be a good thing. There's no disguising the fact that there is something radically wrong with the greater portion of Drellincourt Farm. We have lost over seven thousand pounds by it, and no one who knows anything of its record will have anything to do with it. But there are some people who are positively attracted to a farm that has a bad name—they are mostly unpractical men with theories of crops—rotations

and so forth. The luxury of high farming is probably the most expensive luxury in the world. Now, it occurred to me that if we could find a man who is anxious to work out his theories in this connection we might do a good stroke of business."

"It would undoubtedly be a good stroke of business, assuming that a possible tenant will be made fully acquainted with the record of Drellincourt Farm before we accept him as tenant."

"That is not quite business," said Chris. "Business assumes that a possible tenant will find out all the weak points for himself—and he generally does; business does not assume that it is incumbent on the lessor to elaborate upon the weak points in the bargain which he offers. However, what Mr. Vickers has said is, I know, quite correct. There are some men who are actually attracted to a farm with a bad name."

"Thank Heaven for that!" said Joan, with pious fervency. "If they are attracted in proportion to the badness of the name, Drellincourt should be positively irresistible. I hope that your candidate is a splendid specimen of the type of man you refer to, Mr. Vickers; a typical theorist on the subject of high farming, and full of the obstinacy of a true theorist. Above all, I hope that he is as ignorant as an enthusiast."

"Now we are on the bed rock of business," said Chris.

"He is considering my proposal in respect of the

two largest of the unlet farms ; and he has a surveyor at Drellincourt at the present moment," said Mr. Vickers. "He has rather a fancy for farming, I am happy to say. I found that out long ago ; one requires to understand something of men in my profession, Mr. Foxcroft."

"That means success, Mr. Vickers," acquiesced Chris. "Then you think there is a good chance—of course the man has large means."

"Ample—ample—the foremost man of our day. He has suggested two thousand a year for the mansion and the park lands guaranteeing to maintain the place as it has been maintained."

"And retaining all the servants—I would not allow the harpbourers to be interfered with," said Joan.

"We have not gone into such details as yet," said the solicitor. "One must go very gently—*festina lente*, my dear young lady—that should be our maxim. But I have no doubt whatever that he will accept our suggestion regarding the servants. I gave his agent to understand that three thousand a year was the sum we had in our minds."

"We may have it in our minds ; we shall never have it in our pockets," said Joan. "Three thousand a year is far too much. 'Why, just think ; it will bring up the bare cost of living in the house—leaving eatables out of the question altogether—to about ten thousand pounds. There are fools in the world ; but——"

Then Mr. Vickers lay back in his desk-chair and

laughed—not his usual *nisi prius* laugh, but the laugh of an ordinary person.

“These are the days of men with large incomes, Miss Joan,” said he. “There is Mr. Foxcroft’s friend, Mr. Meadows: he has just bought a house in South Audley Street—it might almost be called Grosvenor Square—indeed it is, I believe, numbered as if it belonged to Grosvenor Square—what would ten thousand a year be to him, Mr. Foxcroft? Why, the merest bagatelle. I hear that your circulation has passed the million daily, Mr. Foxcroft.”

“I have never waited to count the copies,” said Chris. “Is your tenant-presumptive a newspaper proprietor, Mr. Vickers? If so, we are quite prepared to think the best of him.”

“Not yet, Mr. Foxcroft; I have not heard that he has yet bought a paper, though there have been rumours that he had serious intentions regarding the *Times*,” replied Mr. Vickers. “But if he has not already bought a paper, he is bound to do so some day; a man like Mr. Mellor can no more avoid buying a newspaper than one could avoid the smallpox in the last century.”

“Mr. Mellor—is that the name of the man?” said Joan, sternly.

“Mr. Mellor—yes. Is it possible that I did not mention his name before?” said Mr. Vickers. “Oh, yes; Mr. Mellor is our man. I hear that he made over two hundred thousand pounds by his flotation of the Khaki Clothing Company a couple of months

ago. But that is really only a trifle to him. His aim is to be thought a country gentleman ; he bought a little property up north, but he thinks that when he has Selwood over his head his position will be strengthened beyond the possibility of assault. He may really take a fancy to Drellincourt Farm—he may really.”

“He may take as great a fancy to it as he pleases, he will never get it,” said Muriel

“He will never sleep a night under the roof of Selwood,” said Joan.

“I am sure that is what Colonel Selwood would say if he heard that Mr. Mellor had the effrontery to entertain the idea of becoming tenant of Selwood,” said Chris.

Mr. Vickers stared at the three young people. His stare passed from one to the other slowly and gathered force as it went along. He could not speak for some moments. He saw that one of the girls was white, and that the other was rosy. Mr. Foxcroft was pretty much as usual, but the young women were certainly indignant—almost angry.

“I fear that—— But I have made the strictest inquiries,” he managed to say after a long, staring pause. “I would not have entertained the idea of Mr. Mellor unless I had made the amplest inquiry. I have known too well how little dependence is to be placed on vague rumour in the case of men of large financial operations ; but Mr. Mellor——”

“We need not discuss him, Mr. Vickers,” said Muriel.

"It really would be a waste of time—and your time is valuable, Mr. Vickers," said Joan.

"Surely Colonel Selwood told you how this man Mellor tried to get the better of him? I'm afraid that he really did get the better of him too," said Chris.

"I certainly heard nothing that should disqualify Mr. Mellor from being a tenant of Selwood," said Mr. Vickers with some measure of warmth.

"You mean to say that you did not hear how he kept a hold of the Rockingham Bank shares when he had only got them as security for a loan?" said Muriel.

Mr. Vickers did not reply immediately. He ran his eye over the tips of his fingers, and then took a back view of them.

"Well, yes," he said at last. "I believe that Colonel Selwood was under the impression that Mr. Mellor had acted in an unfriendly way toward him in regard to the Rockingham shares, but I think it right to tell you, young ladies, that I advised your father that Mr. Mellor had really been guilty of no—no—breach of business—shall we say business etiquette?"

"You may call a piece of cheating by any name you please," said Joan.

"I fear that you scarcely understand the business aspects of the point in question," said Mr. Vickers. "I told your father that it was really my impression that Mr. Mellor believed that he had a bona fide

claim to the shares. Good heavens! What would a few thousand pounds worth of shares in an obscure bank be to such a man as Mr. Mellor?"

"His financial genius is like an elephant's trunk: though it can uproot a tree, it does not disdain to pick up a pin," said Muriel.

Chris sat silent. He saw that the young women were quite equal to the intricacies of a business conversation. He also saw that Mr. Vickers was feeling that he was in the presence of two masterful young women.

And that was exactly what Mr. Vickers was thinking at that moment.

"It would, I think, be considered in a court of law, that a man's getting certain shares formally registered in the name of another man in exchange for the full value of those shares is equivalent to a bona fide sale, and not merely a loan."

"A court of law will say anything," cried Muriel. "Never mind; no court of law will say that Mr. Mellor shall become our father's tenant."

"The impudence of the man!" cried Joan. "Why, papa confessed that he kicked him across his own room! And now he is not ashamed to offer to become the tenant of Selwood!"

"Nothing that you can do to some men seems to have any effect upon them," said Chris. "If you kick them across a room they have the effrontery to want to do you a good turn the next minute."

Mr. Vickers looked at the speaker. Surely there

was a want of logic in what he had said ; and yet the young women seemed to understand him.

"It really seems to me a fine scheme of retaliation would lie in inducing Mr. Mellor to take over Drellincourt Farm and a few of the others," resumed Chris. "So far as I can gather, Mr. Vickers, you have power to sell the farms. We could bring about the ruin of Mr. Mellor in that way ; I don't suppose that any man, short of the proprietor of a newspaper, could stand the strain of high farming for any length of time."

"We have power to sell the farms," said Mr. Vickers ; "but it would be ludicrous to discuss such a transaction unless in connection with the letting of the mansion. Young ladies, I fear that you do not accurately appreciate the fact that you are simply throwing away an offer of at least six thousand a year—an offer which, I may tell you, I do not think at all likely to be made again. If Mr. Mellor has no ill-feeling on the matter—— But in a business transaction, a purely business transaction, one should be ready to sink all one's personal feelings."

"If you have any doubt in our judgment, Mr. Vickers, you can telegraph to Colonel Selwood," said Chris. "The wires are open to Bloemfontein. To be sure, we don't know where General Firebrace is to-day, but I think you may chance a cable reaching any member of his staff if directed to Bloemfontein. For myself I cannot for a moment question what his reply will be."

"I will certainly telegraph to Colonel Selwood," said Mr. Vickers. "Heavens above, Mr. Foxcroft, is it possible that on a mere question of sentiment— Well, I always thought you a man of the world."

"I have been accused of the same thing before now, but have hitherto been unable to repudiate the charge," said Chris.

"We are sure that you have done everything with a view of advancing our best interests, Mr. Vickers," said Muriel.

"You are certainly not to blame because our father found it necessary to kick Mr. Mellor across the room," said Joan suavely.

"Colonel Selwood kicked Mr. Mellor merely on a point of sentiment," said Chris.

"It is the first time that I have heard of an excess of sentimentality assuming such a form," remarked Mr. Vickers drily.

The three visitors were now on their feet. They shook hands very cordially with Mr. Vickers and filed out of the room.

"I wonder what reply I am to make to Mr. Mellor's agent?" said the lawyer as a last word. There was some melancholy in his voice—the half-toned melancholy of the man who cannot get other people to take his view of a matter and has no power to compel them to do so.

"Oh, you can tell him that we do not consider his references to be satisfactory," said Joan.

Mr. Vickers retired hurt.

CHAPTER XIX

THERE was no silence in the brougham that brought the little party back to Lady Humber's house, nor was there any absence of comment while they drank tea in the little drawing-room. Somehow the spirit of the girls seemed to have risen almost to a point of elation since they had heard that, after all, Selwood was not to be let to a stranger.

"I don't like to make nasty remarks," said Chris, "but I must say it appears to me that you are not overwhelmed with disappointment at the result of Mr. Vickers' negotiations. I fancied that I detected an insincere note in the expression of your satisfaction at his having found you a tenant, before he mentioned the name of Mr. Mellor."

"That is nonsense!" said Muriel, after she had given a little laugh. "It is sheer nonsense, for we know that a tenant—any one in the world except Mr. Mellor—would mean to us the difference between poverty and affluence. But, of course, the idea of Mr. Mellor's sitting in our Chippendale chairs—stalking about under the ceilings that Angelica painted—Angelica and Verrio—sprawling

upon the sofas that Lepine designed—is preposterous. We saw that in a moment—and so did you.”

“Yes; I saw it at once: there was a suggestion of Rowlandson in the picture,” said Chris. “It was like the first notion of Cronje’s going to St. Helena. Somehow we had come to associate St. Helena with Napoleon, and Napoleon with the Greek draperies of the Empress Josephine. Cronje has nothing of the First Empire about him, and I doubt if Madame Cronje could pose with distinction as Madame Roland. Mr. Mellor is not a heroic figure, and as I saw him, walking—better say, as you did, stalking—about the dining-room, with the eyes of Sir Joshua’s George Selwood looking gravely down at him—the eyes of Lady Elizabeth Selwood and her children, with the wonderful spaniel that never was on sea or land—the eyes of Lawrence’s graceful General Selwood looking down at him—the figure of Mr. Mellor became distinctly a thing of Rowlandson at his worst.”

“There are worse things than penury,” said Joan. “Affluence by the aid of Mr. Mellor is one of these things. Even leaving the unhappy influence of the kick out of the question altogether, Mr. Mellor is impossible.”

“Then we shall have to do without a tenant,” said Muriel.

And all the time that Chris was walking to the office of *Morning’s Wing*, he was wondering if

this was so—if every possible tenant was indeed a possible Mellor.

Is the new man who is coming forward to make offers for the occupancy of the great historic houses throughout the country, so greatly inferior to the original occupants of these houses? And the conclusion to which he came was that the ancestor was a greatly overrated person. The ancestor of the eighteenth century was perhaps the most greatly over-rated of all. Talk of bounders—there never were such bounders as the best of the eighteenth-century ancestors of the distinguished houses. If they had worn the commonplace dress of to-day, and if they had been painted by the commonplace painters of to-day, they would very soon find their proper level in society, and that would assuredly be below the ordinary Stock Exchange level of a hero. The picturesque costume and the habit of the minuet saved them. But the men themselves were nothing but brawling bullies and blackguards—that is, the best of them; the ones that history has taken note of—the worst of them, were unspeakable ruffians, who deserved hanging ten times over.

And yet he felt that for Mr. Mellor to be allowed the freedom of Selwood even for the limited space of five years, would be intolerable, and he knew that Muriel and her sister, sensible girls though they were, were secretly pleased that Mr. Vickers' tenant had proved impossible. He knew that they were disposed to think of any tenant for Selwood as

intolerable, and really he could not but acknowledge to himself that he shared their sentiment in this matter. Selwood had ever been in his eyes something akin to Windsor, or the best parts of the Tower, with a wing of the National Portrait Gallery added. It was not so much a place of residence as a sacred trust; and to think of a man whose name was not Selwood shouting out orders to servants dressed in a livery other than that of the family of Selwood was odious.

He had in his early years invented the legend of all the old barons who lay buried in the vaults of one of the great Rhine castles, rising up from their coffins and forcibly throwing into the river the coffin of a merchant who had bought the castle and lived in it, and had given instructions that his bones were to be laid in the vault where the ancient barons were mouldering. The indignity of the stranger's arrival was too much for flesh and blood to stand—even though the flesh had been eaten by worms and the blue blood had become assimilated with the red earth.

He asked himself if one of the great Selwoods would not fling himself, frame and all, from his panel in the dining-hall, and crush to the floor the presumptuous Mr. Mellor the first evening that that person ventured to seat himself at the old oaken table at which a king had been proud to sit.

And yet he knew all the time that the average modern man of money was quite as good a fellow

as that George Selwood who had taken so important a part in the floating of the South Sea Scheme, and had sold out his stock just in time to save himself and to ruin one of his neighbours—yes, and a very much better fellow than the second George Selwood—the one who spent his days betting at White's in the most disreputable society in Europe, and his nights in roystering. When he found time to sit for his portrait to Sir Joshua Reynolds, and to write those letters which have interested several generations of Englishmen, it is difficult to guess.

Perhaps when the figure of Mr. Mellor came to be seen through the radiating mists of a hundred years or so, it might appear quite as interesting—quite as devoid of every element that causes the delicate nostrils of the fastidious to sniff in another direction, as did the portraits of the two George Selwoods. Doubtless in after years the most that people would remember about Mr. Mellor—that is to say, people who were not personally acquainted with him—would be his generosity in beautifying Westminster Abbey. Doubtless steps would be taken to preserve that speech of his in which he had expressed the opinion that it was little short of a national scandal that the original intention of the architect had not been realised ; for it was plain to every one who had eyes that the double spire was needed to make the Abbey architecturally perfect. But that reproach of centuries Mr. Mellor was about to remove ; thereby linking his name with the

name of Edward the Confessor, who had a good deal to say to the early beautifying of the building, and achieving a guide-book immortality.

And yet, in spite of his conviction that Mr. Mellor would, if he only lasted long enough—that was the proviso, not without a suggestion of a paradox, which Chris had in his mind—go down to posterity with a reputation for piety such as the eighteenth-century Selwoods had never achieved even in their old age, Chris could not help feeling that it would be akin to sacrilege to allow him to sit among the portraits of the men who had mortgaged the Selwood property from wing to wing.

And then, being a man of the world as well as a man of the modern leading newspaper article, he went on to wonder what the Georgian Selwoods would think, could it come to their knowledge that one of their daughters had come to an understanding with a man who made his living by writing for the newspaper, that, after the lapse of a certain space of time, she would marry him.

If the world had changed so that the man of millions had shouldered the man of lineage aside, assuredly it had other aspects of change that were equally interesting. The man who had brains—some brains—brains sufficient to dictate to the Government what course they should adopt at a critical moment—brains sufficient to make a war impossible by pointing out to the 'people, the millions who read a newspaper and are swayed by

the expression of its views, that there is no cause for war—this man who had brains and could use them was not to be shouldered aside by any one. The man who wrote for the newspaper had become a power in the world.

And he knew it.

Chris Foxcroft had no illusion on the subject of his own power or his own position in the world. He knew that he had done much to make *Morning's Wing* a power in the land, both by his own writing in its columns and his suggestions as to what the readers of a morning paper wanted to read. And then his books were widely circulated in England and America, and he had another at the point of being published—a book which, as he had told Muriel and her sister, had been thought too startling in the novelty of the views it expressed on a subject of great social interest—it had been thought too startling the previous year; but so rapidly do aspects of things change that the cautious publishers had told him that no further caution was necessary, and he was about to issue the book at once. Chris did not underrate his own power to achieve success in the world, nor did he overrate it. He had always worked with his eyes open, and he had always possessed the capacity to profit by his own mistakes as well as by the mistakes of other people.

He was satisfied with the progress that he had made in life. He was a year or two over thirty,

and he knew very well that if he had become associated with any other profession than that which he followed, he would not be in receipt of the income that he now enjoyed. And he had the crowning satisfaction of feeling that he owed nothing to luck. He had worked honestly for all that he had won. The only luck that he had had in life was represented by the heart of Muriel Selwood. He had no illusion on this point either. He knew that she might have married a man whose position in the world was assured ; she might have married another who had both wealth and position, and yet she was to marry him. This was his one piece of luck in life and he felt that he wanted no more. He could work for the rest.

And when he reached his office he found a letter awaiting him from Mr. Meadows, asking him if he could make it convenient to dine with him that evening, preparatory to considering a matter of some importance connected with the future of the newspaper.

He was rather surprised to receive such a letter from the proprietor of the paper. He knew very well how amazing had been the increase in the circulation of the paper since the beginning of the year—as a matter of fact, nothing like it had been known in the history of journalism—and now and again Mr. Meadows had given him to understand that he attributed this extraordinary advance in a large measure to Chris's system of dealing with the

war and the news from the front. It seemed that he had given the public just what they wanted. It was not in his power to turn the news of the British reverses into the news of great British victories, but he had prevented readers from being unduly depressed by the evil tidings. *Morning's Wing* had done much to allay panic, and had struck the true note from day to day in dealing with the situation in South Africa.

And then there was the topographical feature which Chris had introduced. *Morning's Wing* was really the only paper in London that gave its readers a bird's-eye view, so to speak, of the scene of every incident worth mentioning in the course of the war. Most of the papers gave maps dealing with every locality, but maps are not universally understood. They are flat, and no one wants information on the flat. Therefore Chris set himself about the business of dealing with everything from the standpoint of one acquainted with every kopje and every drift that figured in the accounts of the fighting, and it seemed that the public liked his method.

Mr. Meadows, at any rate, liked it, and took no pains to conceal the fact from him.

"You were quite right to remain at home," he said one day. "You knew more about what the paper required than I did. You looked farther ahead, and you see the result. Forrester is doing very well for us: he lets nothing pass. You would have been more vivid in your account of the

Colesberg affair, no doubt; but that very strong point of yours might have actually worked against the best interests of the paper: the public don't want disasters to be picturesquely described."

"I think I might have managed to be unpicturesque," said Chris. "It is the easiest thing in the world to be unpicturesque. I think that Forrester hits the happy medium. He does not photograph the wounds nor phonograph the curses; and that's what Fardell of the *Voice* founds his fame on. Give Fardell a peep into the hospital tent when a man's brains are being removed, and he is all right. If men didn't curse horribly Fardell would not be counted an artist. But his phonograph is not squeamish."

"Forrester is all right," Mr. Meadows had said, "and as a matter of fact everything is all right."

Remembering all this, Chris was at a loss to understand on what point Mr. Meadows was becoming restless. He was not of a restless temperament. He never fancied that to be restless was to be resistless. He contented himself with being resistless. To be untiring is to be resistless, and Mr. Meadows had never been tired in all his life. He was not even tired of life—although he was thirty-four and unmarried and one of the most conspicuous successes in the profession of driving brains.

Of all the untractable teams in the world, brains are the most notorious, and the man who can control a tandem of them need not shrink from a four-

in-hand of zebras. But Mr. Meadows had driven a whole team of brains without an accident for several years. That was because he cared about nothing else in the world but this particular work. He kept on good terms with every member of his team, and never used a bearing rein.

He had his theories in regard to women. People said this was why he had not married. A man who is wedded to a theory in regard to woman cannot, without committing bigamy, marry any particular woman. It is only when he gets a divorce from his theory that he has a chance of happiness in marriage.

But no one had yet found in what direction his theory was located, or if it had come to him as the result of an early misplaced confidence; though some mothers in Mayfair professed to be able to tell to a shade the tint of her hair dye: the early misplaced confidence had become personal and had obtained a brevet sex by being talked about.

But no one could say that his experience had soured him; though a good many people said that it had made him wary.

They tried to sound Chris on the subject of the theory.

One mother had asked him long ago, by way of leading gently up to the subject, and refraining from the startling sensation of the plunge:

"Is your friend Mr. Meadows married?"

"On the contrary, he is a successful newspaper-

proprietor," Chris had replied, and the mother had stared and turned to the man on her left—it was at a dinner party—with a safe question about the Academy.

But the purchase of the house in South Audley Street had disorganised the ranks of those people who had come to think of Mr. Meadows as hopeless. They said, with some plausibility, that no man should be beyond the hope of a woman, who had bought a house that was numbered as if it were actually in Grosvenor Square.

Others said that a barbed-wire theory regarding women was no protection to a man when once he had bought a house with five reception rooms *en suite*, and a staircase.

But the wise ones waited.

And Chris Foxcroft was among the wise ones, for he was now waiting, for the first time, outside the door of Mr. Meadows' new house for the footman to respond to his ring.

Mr. Meadows' business with Chris was of the simplest nature. After dinner he passed him a box of cigars, saying,

"I want you to take over the editorship of the paper from Groves, Foxcroft. Groves tells me that he has received a legacy from a disregarded godfather from whom he expected nothing, and he is anxious to devote himself for the rest of his life to the acclimatisation of the Rondel in England."

CHAPTER XX

CHRIS retained self-possession enough to laugh.

"Groves is ambitious," he said. "I had no idea that he had such high aspirations. I doubt if he will succeed. Rondels are kittle cattle. I don't think that the form will ever become so popular in England as to oust the metre of Tate and Brady. Any poet in England who ventures beyond Tate and Brady sooner or later finds himself on the rocks. Tate and Brady are essentially English."

"I agree with you in the main," said Mr. Meadows thoughtfully. "But you will, I am sure, acknowledge that a man with a legacy sufficient to keep him in ease for the rest of his life is the man to experiment with exotic metres. Orchids are the recreation of one statesman, and the Rondel is the orchid of the literary man with a legacy."

It seemed as if the important part of what Mr. Meadows had said with such startling suddenness was that which had reference to the intention of Mr. Groves, the existing editor-in-chief of *Morning's Wing*, to acclimatise the French Rondel. But Mr. Meadows never for a moment was so far misled as to fancy that the future of Mr. Groves was quite

so interesting to his guest as the future of Chris Foxcroft. The Rondel as a siding for a train of thought had, he knew, its advantages. He had no trouble in perceiving that a good many thoughts and speculations and perhaps even dreams had come crowding up in the mind of Chris Foxcroft, and that he was glad to be shunted into the siding of the French Rondel to get time to steady himself.

After a rather long pause, Mr. Meadows said,

"I hope that you will see me through this business, Foxcroft. You are the only one I know who understands all sides of the policy of the *Wing*, and who needs no training. My dear Foxcroft, it is an awful thing to have passed the first million in the circulation of a daily paper. I am sure that you have felt that at times during the month that has gone by."

"I have—I have," said Chris. "It is like annexing the half of a continent."

"More than that—more than that," said Mr. Meadows, and his voice fell a tone or two; it was trembling on the border line of a whisper with some depth of awe in it. "Stout Cortez getting his first glimpse of the Pacific."

"Silent upon a peak of Darien," suggested Chris.

"The Pacific—just think of it—illimitable—illimitable."

"With El Dorado at his feet." Chris ventured upon a simile. "Cortez thought more of the El Dorado than of the Ocean."

Mr. Meadows had not responded to the simile. It was clear to Chris that he had a full sense of the responsibility which a circulation of over a million copies daily entailed. "I am not like Cortez in this respect. I think of the conquest of the Ocean and its illimitable possibilities. It is not on record that any daily paper ever continued printing over a million copies daily for a month. I do not take the credit to myself. I simply regard myself as the trustee of the credit which the million buyers give to the paper."

"The man who has his hand on the throttle valve of the locomotive has a good deal to say to the running of the train, Mr. Meadows," said Chris "Yes, even though the steam does most of the work. You have controlled the whole concern, and the result is the greatest success the world has yet known."

"The steam of my locomotive is brains—your brains and the brains of the other members of my staff; and if the brains ceased to work the machine would come to a standstill. I want you to stand by me when Groves leaves. You are the only man who knows as much as Groves knows, and I fancy you are the only one who knows a little more."

"I hoped to get his room in ten years—I would have been satisfied with it in fifteen," said Chris.

"That's all right. I hope that you will be in that room for ten years—fifteen. You have taken a weight off my mind, Foxcroft. To tell you the

truth I was afraid that you were thinking more of the possibility of your books carrying you on than of journalism. So many men trust themselves to sink or swim with their books."

"And most of them sink. I have never thought much of my books. . . . Mr. Meadows, you know why I have rambled a bit in talking to you just now. You know, I am sure, that it is because I—I am rather overwhelmed. I, too, feel like Cortez: I have had my glimpse of the Pacific. It means so much to me. No one knows how much it means to me. . . . Success . . . well, I feel that I have got it all before working for more than half of it. . . . And indeed, I, too, feel that the El Dorado at my feet is a small thing compared to the Ocean which is before my eyes. . . . Peril . . . of course there is peril in every ocean that has never been charted . . . but that is nothing. The risks of the rocks and the shoals are all in the day's work. I accept the risks—not quite with a light heart, but still hopefully."

Mr. Meadows gave him his hand; Chris was at the point of being overcome when he put out his own, for the vision that came before him at that moment, shining through the sea mist from that ocean upon which he had dwelt with great persistency as a simile, was one that he had seen when a boy, and when a glimpse into the future brings to one the same feeling as a glimpse into the past, one is confused by wondering which is the mirage.

But in the moment of that silence, which had a certain kinship with a sob, Mr. Meadows pushed back his chair and rose, saying,

"Thank Heaven that is settled. And now come and have a look at my new house. Take another cigar. You have let the other go out. Oh, no; don't light the end. Throw it away. Good heavens, man, have you been talking of illimitable oceans, and have you been listening to me talking of a circulation of over a million, and yet you can think of relighting the end of a cigar? This house was built about the time that Dr. Johnson's friends, the Thrales, came to live round the corner in the Square. Thrale died in that house round the corner, as I daresay you know. A contemptible sort of man, I think—not a shrewd man of business, but, on the contrary, a fool. It is no wonder that his widow married Piozzi. She wanted to become associated with a gentleman—having had enough of the other kind of person."

Mr. Meadows was a man of thought as well as a man of tact. He knew that his guest had a weakness for the people of the eighteenth century, and that he held remarkable views on the subject of Dr. Johnson and his intimates. If he could manage to induce him to talk of Dr. Johnson as the Great Sham as well as the Great Cham he would soon place him at his ease once more, and cause him to forget the disconcerting tone of their previous conversation on business.

And Chris, being also a man of some power of observation, was tactful enough to fall readily into the snare which he saw Mr. Meadows had laid for him. He said that, of course, it was plain that why Johnson and the rest of the Thrale crew had made the outcry about the widow's marrying Piozzi was because they had not asked her to marry themselves. Thrale, a patron of the arts, because he had commissioned Sir Joshua to paint those portraits—the finest that the world has yet seen—for the Streatham gallery! Well, that might be accounted to him for righteousness if it were not for the fact of his having kept the painter out of his money for those immortal pictures. In fact, Thrale, the patron of the arts, had successfully evaded payment for the pictures. His system was certainly the most inexpensive way of getting a reputation as an art patron.

So he went on, with great tact, perceiving that his host was congratulating himself on his own tact in once more running him into a siding off the original trunk line of their conversation.

Mr. Meadows laughed in easy tolerance of a guest with a hobby, and not without a note of self-com mendation for his own adroitness in setting his guest so easily astride of his hobby; and so with a word or two of admiration for the carved Italian walnut of the dining-room walls, they passed into the snug library—a room about forty feet long, lined with Chippendale bookcases, and with two noble fireplaces of carved coloured marbles. Chris had a

word to say about Wedgwood and the Brothers Adam, Angelica Kaufmann, Chambers, and the other confederates in the imitations of the limitations of the antique.

The staircase was quite imposing, and would have been eagerly seized on by any auctioneer advertising the house. He would certainly have made it the leading feature of the interior.

"Thank Heaven for the hoops of the last century!" said Chris devoutly. "They have given us the priceless legacy of noble staircases."

"And what have we to thank for the noble iron-work?" asked Mr. Meadows, pointing to the lovely specimen of wrought iron that climbed from step to step, with an outward curve to give another inch or two to the swinging hoops. "You have heard of that man Mellor, of course," continued Mr. Meadows. "He has about as much taste as a Boer field cornet. He sent to one of the illustrated papers a photograph of the pair of iron gates which he got made for a scrap of a place he bought a couple of years ago—when he first started on his campaign as the ideal country gentleman. The gates are cast iron, of course, and already one of the griffins—the griffin is, it appears, the crest of the Mellors—which was supported by nothing in the centre of the gates, has lost half a wing and the greater part of a once luxuriant tail. I hear that Mellor has become more ambitious and is looking out for a home with a history ready made."

"I heard something about that, too," said Chris. "I shouldn't wonder if he were to order a couple of Chicago spires for the Abbey. They can come across in sections and be bolted together after' the manner of the boats taken to the African lakes."

And then Mr. Meadows switched on the lights and they entered the first of the three drawing-rooms—a large and well-proportioned room but without decoration.

"I shall get it done some of these days," said the proprietor. "I don't feel any particular need for it just now; personally I can manage to breathe quite freely in the three or four rooms which I have made habitable. You see I am quite alone in the world—*ego et rex meus*—the newspaper."

"I wonder that you never speak of women, Mr. Meadows," said Chris, after a pause. "It seems hardly possible for a man to stand at the door of his drawing-room without saying something about a woman—perhaps 'the' woman."

"Certainly not 'the' woman," said the other. "A man is safe so long as he can talk about 'a' woman, but the man who takes to talking about 'the' woman is lost."

"You talk of neither," said Chris.

"My dear Foxcroft," said Meadows, "the reason I never talk of woman is because there is nothing else worth thinking about. There's a dark saying for you. Yes, I suppose that for the honour of a house so close to the Square, I must have the room decorated."

"I know an artist who would repaint those panels in the true spirit of the originals," said Chris suddenly.

"I should like to find him. Who is he?" asked the proprietor. "A Frenchman or an Italian? I will have nothing to say to either."

"My artist is a woman," said Chris. "She understands her business. I saw some panels that she painted the other day. They were exquisite. She has the most delicate touch in the world, and the most graceful fancy. She has lived all her life among the best things of this sort in England."

"I have often wondered how it is that women do not take up this business of house decoration," said Meadows. "It is essentially woman's work, and it is easily within the scope of any woman who is something of an artist. They will insist on doing their studies in still life—an orange and a bunch of grapes on the table covered with a cloth, and with a piece of realism in the form of a beer bottle on a shelf handy. They complain that people will not buy this sort of thing in a frame. The same amount of technical ability that is displayed in painting a work of this sort which nobody wants, would be sufficient to enable the artist to paint a room that every one wants painted."

"That is exactly how the young woman whom I have in my mind looks at the matter," said Chris. "She knows that the greatest artists who have ever lived in the world were quite pleased to have the chance of decorating a room, and that it is only

the mediocre moderns who think that it would be undignified on their part to do what they call house-painting."

"She is a sensible girl," said Mr. Meadows. "She deserves to succeed. I daresay she has done so already. Still, this is a rather important room. A girl who might set about painting a panel on a door with a light heart, might shrink from such a job as this. Of course, there must be a separate design for every panel."

"She is not a stencil artist," said Chris. "But the room might frighten her."

"You need not tell her that it is so close to Grosvenor Square. The timid might shrink from Grosvenor Square."

Chris, with the recollection of the drawing-rooms at Selwood in his mind, laughed. One could have taken this South Audley Street house out of one of the wings of Selwood, without interfering greatly with the impression of size which the latter produced upon any one visiting it for the first time.

"If you should think of having the panels decorated I will be delighted to let you see some specimens of her work, and then you can judge of her capacity," said he.

"That will be the more satisfactory plan," said Mr. Meadows. "And the sooner the better. I find that the appetite grows with the eating in these matters of beautifying a house. When we entered the room I had a notion that next year or so I might perhaps

get it made habitable, but since we have been talking about it I have found that it is unendurable to live in the house so long as this room remains in its present condition. If I don't set your artist friend to work at once I shall have to send to Denbigh & Parr for designs."

"And they will overrun your house with banditti for six months, and leave the room a ruin of bright colours and ruddy figures all out of drawing," laughed Chris.

"I daresay you are right. I must confess that the Hotel Cosmopolitan is not my idea of charming colouring. I shall ask your protégée to give me an estimate for the panels, provided that I see she knows her business."

"I think that she will be able to satisfy you on that point," said Chris.

And then Mr. Meadows switched off the lights and went down the beautiful staircase with his guest.

At the foot the butler waited to say that the brougham was at the door.

They drove together to the office of *Morning's Wing*, and the subject of their conversation was the very doubtful discretion shown by the War Office in publishing the comments of the Commander-in-Chief on some of his most incompetent generals. Mr. Meadows thought that Chris might write something scathing about the War Office. It is always popular to be scathing in referring to a department.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was when Chris was on his way to his chambers at an early hour in the morning that he began to reflect upon the fact that the previous day had been the most eventful in his life. He had waited and waited and everything had come to him. When his father had told him that he must no longer regard the rectory as his home, he had come to London with only just enough money to keep himself from starving. But in spite of this he had starved through two years, writing day and night things which no one wanted to read and which, consequently, no one wanted to buy. The first marketable literature that he produced was an account of a wheel coming off an omnibus and the overturning of the vehicle and the consequent injury done to the passengers. Every one wanted to read all that could be written regarding wheels coming off 'busses, and that literature which concerned itself with the sufferings of omnibus passengers was clearly the most popular on the face of the earth.

He made exactly eight and tenpence by that effort, being paid on a scale which the young man

in the newspaper office (Cashier's Department) called "line-age."

He soon came to know all about "line-age," and he thought that he would let a few days elapse before he sent the paper, which he had written the year before, on the subject of Tennyson and Catullus, to the one magazine that had not received the chance of returning it to him. All the other magazines had been afforded such a chance, and had availed themselves of it with the most chilling promptness. No one appeared to be very anxious to be instructed on the fact that Tennyson had modelled his style on Catullus. Chris found after a time that he did not care much about it himself; though the year before he knew that he had thought it a matter that had a very important bearing upon the position in literature of the English poet.

Then there was the midnight arrest of the Anarchist Lipmann outside Marlborough House. Chris had providentially come up when the man was struggling in the hands of the police, and he had not hesitated to take a hansom down to Fleet Street in order to write the column in the one newspaper that contained any mention of the subject the next morning. That was a good night's work; the newspaper gave him to understand that any information which he might send in future would be inserted and paid for at scale rate. But he soon found that the editor expected him to discover noted Anarchists in the act of being arrested, every week, and when the supply gave out,

to make equally sensational discoveries for the exclusive benefit of his particular paper, and he was by no means willing to accept the rescue of a man from drowning as an equivalent.

He fell out of favour with this paper, only making two pounds out of his paragraphs in the course of a month. But then came his chance in life, and he seized upon it, all unconscious of the fact that it represented the first rung of the ladder. He was walking along one of the streets between Oxford Street and the Museum, when he heard the dry squeak of the axle of a cart wheel that wanted greasing badly, and in a second a fox terrier broke away from a cord by which a lady was being led by it, and rushed at the squeak, with ears well forward, and the yelp of the accomplished ratter. Several times down the street it made frantic attempts to throttle and toss the persistent squeak, but all were quite ineffectual, and its mistress, after a long pursuit, managed to secure the animal and to restrain it from further efforts, while the axle-squeak passed uncaptured and defiant into the distance.

This was the incident which gave Chris Foxcroft a permanent place in the literature of his country; for the half-column that he wrote describing it achieved that distinction known as "catching-on," and the editor of the paper in which it appeared sent for him and gave him a position on his staff. This editor was less exacting than the one who had instructed him to describe an Anarchist's arrest for

every Monday's issue ; he did not expect a description of other dogs—mongrel, puppy, whelp, or hound, or curs of low degree—following axle-squeaks ; but he expected in the course of a description of other incidents, such as a Royal Wedding or the Funeral of a Field-Marshal, a display of such observation as Chris had shown in his account of the fox terrier and the invisible rat.

And he got it.

Walking to his rooms through the silent streets, Chris recalled his years of starvation, and his years of early success—these were the years that gave him his knowledge of the world and its people, and it was in order to become acquainted with the world and its people that he had left his home.

And now he had achieved all that he had ever hoped to achieve ; only his success had not been quite in the direction in which he had fancied it lay.

Still, Success had stretched out a hand to him, and he had grasped it, and he knew that Success would not let him go.

And through all his reflections there ran the golden thread of the thought that Muriel Selwood loved him—that she had loved him before he was on hand-shaking terms with Success, and that she would marry him whenever he might ask her. Their understanding was one of sentiment ; but at the same time it was bounded on all sides by figures, these figures representing his income in pounds. A three-figure income takes a long time to get into

the pleasant region of four figures—that Land of Beulah—that Valley of Avalon—that Garde Joyeuse where lovers can live at ease and in love—but in a moment he had been transported to this territory, and he hoped to become as fully acquainted with the elements of its topography as he was with that of South Africa. In a moment his income had been more than doubled, and it was better by some hundreds of pounds than the income which he and Muriel had fixed upon as the practical one to give them admission to the land which they saw afar off through the perspective glass of the Interpreter's House—the Interpreter's name being Love.

How happy the days of the struggle had been ! The feeling of exultation at the final victory was no greater than that which had been the result of any trifling success which he had made in the past. Every success had been sweet to him because it had brought him nearer to Muriel ; and so excellent had been the perspective glass through which they had viewed the land to which they were journeying, that now when he had got close to the land, its beauty was not more apparent than it had been when they were yet far off.

He remembered what his first thought had been when Mr. Meadows had made his offer to him. He had felt that his success had come hard upon the failure of his beloved one. He had just left her while she was experiencing the sting of failure, and this fact had had a saddening effect upon him.

He wanted her to feel that she, too, had worked for success, and had achieved it by her own work.

Quickly, however, the chance had been given to him of making her feel that her work had been successful—that she was not merely to be a participator in the result of his work. He had told Mr. Meadows of her, without mentioning her name, and he could now go to her and let her know that she too would have a chance of proving that she had a personality in work, so to speak—that she was an entity in the world, and not merely a young woman who was ready to become the wife of a successful man.

He derived a greater satisfaction from this reflection than he did from the thought that his own work had obtained recognition from Mr. Meadows.

He had given some attention to the theory that the charm of a woman is in proportion to her dependence upon a man. He had analysed this theory, and the result was to impress upon him the fact that it had been started by the man in order to magnify his own generosity. It had originated with the prehistoric man, who found it convenient to render the prehistoric woman quite helpless before dragging her to his cave by the hair of her head. The custom of women wearing their hair long also dated back to the prehistoric woman, who was not merely willing, but anxious, to afford the prehistoric man every facility for conveying her to his cave in a helpless condition.

The world is still populated with prehistoric men and still more prehistoric women, he knew ; the former had still this instinct in regard to the helpless woman, and the latter still wore her hair long, and she certainly retained some of her original instinct of admiration for the man who carried a weapon and dragged her about by the hair of her head. But Chris was strongly of the belief that this mode of courtship has become unpopular with the man and the woman who are not quite so prehistoric as their brethren. There are, he believed, some who fail to see that the happiness of married life is dependent upon the helplessness of the woman ; and so far as he himself was concerned, he knew that his chance of happiness with such a woman as Muriel Selwood would be illimitably increased if she came to him with a consciousness that she, too, was an entity of success as a worker, and not merely the helpless wife of a successful worker.

He did not go so far as to think that, if he had married her before she had become aware of her need to work for a living, he would not have been happy with her ; he felt that it was enough for him to know that, having set her hand to the plough, she would be disappointed if any one should take it out of her hand suggesting that she was a bungler.

He was not going to prove to her that she could do nothing for herself, and then marry her to keep her—speaking extravagantly—from starvation. She

must come to him without any feeling of disappointment—without any feeling of helplessness. He would not give her the impression of being dragged by the hair of the head to his cave.

Thus it is that civilisation is at last beginning to overcome the instincts of the prehistoric, and men are finding a charm in having the woman sitting beside them and not crouching at their feet.

Thus it is that woman is at last becoming a distinct entity without decreasing the fascinations of the chase—always dear to the man.

He went to her the next day, and found her alone. Her experience of Mrs. Kirke had not discouraged her. She was giving some touches of delicate colour to an oval picture that she had painted the previous year—Eros and his companions shooting arrows at rose petals which they had flung to the winds.

"I have come to the determination to forsake the counsels of good Mr. Parr and to leave our friends still in the hands of the paper hangman," said she. "I mean to take the bold step of submitting my work to some one in Mr. Parr's line of business, only in a smaller way. One can easily understand how any man who is in the habit of getting orders for such hotels as the Cosmopolitan should be demoralised, and think very humbly of a twelve-roomed house—and that, too, a suburban villa, perhaps."

"You are perfectly right," said he. "But, last

evening, Mr. Meadows not only offered me the chance of getting you to paint the drawing-room panels in his new house, he appointed me editor of his paper as well."

It was extremely interesting to him to watch the roseate tint—far more delicately transparent than the damask rose petals on her picture—flash and flush over her face and ears and throat. He knew that she was thinking the same thought that was in his heart. The eloquent pulsation of crimson beneath the porcelain of her cheeks brought to him its message straight from her heart.

She looked at him, and there was in her eyes the sweetest shyness he had ever seen there. She laid down her palette, and somehow in his eyes the act had a symbolism of its own.

He put his arms about her.

"My dearest!" he said. "My dearest!"

He did not get any further. He had meant to say a great deal to her; and perhaps he said it, though he got no further than those words.

She had meant to say nothing to him; but yet she spoke a whole heartfelt, when she whispered with her face close to his,

"At last—at last!"

They had exhausted their conversation, but he was ambitious: he tried to express to her more than the silence expressed. He kissed her hands with pathetic significance. He kissed the dainty little hollow under her elbow, and allowed his face to rest

upon her arm. It felt like cool satin to his face. And then he put his hand at the back of her shapely head and kissed her on each cheek.

She laughed.

Then, having exhausted their conversation, they began to talk.

"I knew it would come," said she; "but I had no idea that it would come so soon."

"Three years," said he. "Three years!"

"Is it really three years since we made our compact?" she cried. "Now tell me if it really seems so long to you, my Chris?"

"It does not seem more than so many months," said he. "The people who have written about the dreariness of waiting knew nothing of their business—or ours. The waiting is nothing."

"Which is your Rachel—the newspaper or me?" she laughed. "Seven years for Rachel. But you have only served three years for me. Ten years if the paper is your Leah."

"The paper is my Leah," said he. "Did I say that the years of working for the paper had passed like a dream? Oh, no. It was the years for Rachel that seemed as nought. There is the knowledge of the true lover for you—there is nothing of the lyric artist in that—nothing of the dreary, weary waiting."

"But the writer said nothing about Rachel's waiting," cried she. "She was only a girl at the beginning of the vigil—her impressions had no literary interest."

"She was a girl at the beginning ; and she waited into womanhood. Womanhood comes by waiting."

"And manhood comes by working. Jacob, when he had won Rachel, was twice the man he was before he began his years of work. . . . But it was I who bargained for myself ; I had the commercial instincts of Laban. Is that a phase of our modernity, Chris ? What would have been thought of the girl of long ago who would dare to base a compact of love upon a foundation of pounds per annum ? And yet I knew that I was right. And you agreed with me. Were we right, Chris ? . . . Think of your friend Forrester. No one will ever make Forrester an editor, and it is doubtful if his second son will go to Harrow. Poor old Forrester should have waited."

A sudden wave of sympathy for Veteran Forrester, doing all the hard work at the front, while younger men were lolling back among cushions, holding the white hand of Amaryllis up to their lips every now and again, came over Chris.

"I will do all that can be done for good old Forrester," he cried. "If he had not gone to the front I might have been there to-day and some one else editor of *Morning's Wing*. Who can tell ? There is so much in being on the spot. I owe Forrester a good turn. And you must not say that he has handicapped himself in the race, my Muriel. It is quite enough for us to do what we feel suits ourselves best ; we shall say nothing about Forrester."

"You are right, Chris; it is enough for us to say that working has made a man of you and that waiting has made a woman of me. . . . But you said—was it something about Mr. Meadows' new house—a drawing-room of panels? Alas! Chris. I am a failure. I cannot work. I can only wait."

"Your years of waiting are over," said he. "Do you believe that, when I promised to see you and Joan through in this business that you set yourselves to do, I meant only that I should see you prove yourselves failures? Dearest girl, it was after Mr. Meadows offered me the editorship that I told him I knew a young woman who would give him an estimate for painting his panels, when she had submitted to him samples of her work."

"It was—it was—you tell me the truth?" she cried, starting up. "You have believed in me, Chris—you believe that I can do something—that I am not a failure? God bless you, my dear love; you have understood me—you understand me. Oh, Chris, if I were to fail now, nothing would make me the same girl again—no, not even your love."

"I should hope not," he said. "I have set my heart on marrying a woman."

They had scarcely dropped each other's hands when Joan entered the room without having removed her hat or jacket.

"Whence these insolently exultant looks?" she cried. "Chris, you are as if you were looking all the future in the face, and, Muriel, you are as if you

were looking straight at all the past, and were making a mock of it."

"And you are as if some one had told you that there is no time like the present for living in," said Chris.

"And that is the truth ; I have just received the offer of an engagement," said Joan.

"But I thought that you had even thrown over poor Lady Bannockburn, and did not intend to sing any more," said Muriel.

"To sing? Who is talking of singing?" cried her sister. "Do you fancy that I am idiotic enough to think there is such a thing as a paying engagement to sing? No, I am no longer a vocalist ; I am a cook."

CHAPTER XXII

CHRIS lay back once more among the cushions of the sofa and laughed with his whole heart. But Muriel did not laugh.

"There's nothing funny about the matter, my dear Chris," said Joan. "I am not talking in metaphors. I am really and truly and literally a cook, and the more people who are made acquainted with that fact the better it will be for me—and perhaps for them, though I am not so sure of that."

"What has happened to turn you into a cook?" asked Muriel, with an air of curiosity but not of unkindness.

"What's the matter with the world just now is that there are too many singers but not too many cooks—on the contrary, there are too few," said Joan, speaking as one having exclusive information on a recondite subject.

"We admit that readily," said Chris. "There are too many singers and too few vocalists—and cooks if you insist upon it. And how has the paucity of cooks been diminished by a unit?"

"I met quite accidentally just now Lilian Romer,"

said Joan. "You have heard us speak of Lilian, Chris?"

"Of course I have," replied Chris. "She married a naval man, didn't she?"

"Yes, and he died on the West Coast of Africa, leaving her with about a hundred a year to live on—to starve on," said Joan. "But she didn't starve, and she isn't on the way of starving. She is a practical Scotch woman, and instead of setting up in some squalid place to teach languages—instead of calling herself Madame Something and setting up a bonnet shop—instead of trying her vocalism on her friends and turning them into her enemies, she apprenticed herself to the best teacher of cooking in Vienna, and now she has more engagements than she can fulfil, going out to cook *recherche* dinners and luncheons. She has been searching for an assistant for the past year, and only to-day her search was rewarded—she found me. That's the whole story told in short. It would weary you, kind people, were I to repeat verbatim our conversation which led up to this crisis. But I am a cook."

"That's the crisis, any way," said Chris. "I had no notion that cooks were so easily made. But a national crisis develops national character in the twinkling of an eye, and I suppose that in matters of cuisine——"

"Heavens! Is it possible you never heard that since I was fifteen I have been a pupil under Mrs.

Harvey at home?" cried Joan. "That is always the way; if a girl sings ever so badly she gets a reputation—among her friends at least—for being a vocalist; if she paints a little she is alluded to as an artist; but if she has reached a high point of culture in a much more difficult and a much less understood art than either—the art of cooking—no one ever mentions it to her credit."

"Truer words were never spoken," said Chris. "I am ashamed to say that I forgot a matter which is so greatly to your credit. I now remember, what was perfectly well known at Selwood, that you used to give up some of your time to learning all that Mrs. Harvey could teach you."

"And every one knows that Mrs. Harvey is one of the most original minds ever associated with 'l'haute cuisine,'" said Muriel. "Mr. Vickers, who knows a good deal about this subject, considers her the best cook in England."

"So does Lilian Romer," said Joan. "That was why she was so ready to take me into partnership. She knows that I alone possess the secret of the Mayonnaise Josephine and the Sauce Phénicoptère, and she admits that there is a fortune in the two. Oh, Lilian is a thoroughly practical woman."

"I am beginning to think that she is not the only one left in the world," said Chris.

"The only drawback she has yet found to her work is the impossibility of getting an assistant who is not an actual hindrance, she says," continued

Joan. "Of course, any one can easily understand how this should be."

"Mrs. Romer is in the kitchen but not of the kitchen," suggested Chris.

"If I were an ordinary cook in a respectable house, I am certain that I would not tolerate a person with the voice of a lady, who might be called in to counteract my deficiencies," said Muriel.

"That's why she wants me—and she wants me badly too," said Joan. "And that's why I am going out with her to-morrow night to make a beginning; and that's why I want to borrow one of your painting-blouses, my sister—if you chance to have one that's moderately clean. Two pounds a week in the off season—this is the off season—and three pounds in the best weeks of the summer. That's sure; and anything that's sure is a good deal better than singing for one's friends."

"You are a braver girl than even I took you to be; and I can assure you that to say so much is to say a good deal," said Chris. "Good luck to you, my Joan; you are nearer being sublime than you fancy."

"She possesses all the imagination of the family," said Muriel indulgently. "There is the new thing which you said we must hit upon if we wanted to succeed as the greengrocer succeeded who introduced the banana when the orange was squeezed dry. Only, my dear Joan, do you expect that papa will ever give his consent to your going out as a cook when he comes home?"

"It will be time enough to face that difficulty when it actually confronts us," said Joan. "I hope to be prepared to fight papa on this or any other question by the time he comes home."

"So far as I can gather," remarked Chris, "the training in controversy which a cook acquires in the course of a month or two is of so thorough a character as to make her a most dangerous opponent. Already—it may be fancy, but I give you the idea for what it is worth—I seem sensible of an authoritative note in your conversation, my dear Joan; a sort of combination, if I may be permitted to say so, of the imperative methods of the iron grid, with the drastic insistence of the egg whisk."

Joan laughed.

"I suppose that one does instinctively acquire the 'business' of a *rôle*," she said. "To turn arguments into omelettes, as you suggest I have been doing, is to follow my new professional instincts."

"It is an honest attempt to solve the great problem of the omelette," said Chris. "How to make an omelette without breaking eggs has been the despair of ages. Perhaps having solved this one, you may be tempted to try your hand at the great cake question. How to eat your cake and yet have your cake, represents the ideal of secular philosophy."

"My ideal is to eat my cake, and for some one else to have the indigestion," said Joan. "Some people are evermore suffering from indigestion from

the cakes that have been eaten by others. Muriel is one of those people ; she is beginning to be pained even before I have eaten my cake ; that is why she suggests that I shall have to 'fight papa from kloof to kopje over the question of my cookies."

"If you have to fight, Jo dear, you may count on me as an ally," said Muriel. "And now congratulate me on the likelihood of my getting an order to do the panels in a drawing-room from the windows of which you can see Grosvenor Square, and compliment Chris upon the discrimination of Mr. Meadows in appointing him editor of *Morning's IVing* with an excessive salary."

"What ! what ! two such strokes of luck ! That makes a total of three among us—excellent for one morning," cried Joan. "Oh, Chris, you have worked for it—you deserve it. When did it happen ? You said nothing about it yesterday."

"It only happened last night," said he. "I went to dine with Mr. Meadows, and he sprung it on me after dinner. You see, it was what is called in journalistic circles the psychological moment."

"I have heard the hour spoken of very highly—when the dinner has been good," said Joan. "It is a grateful reflection for a cook to have that she may contribute materially to the psychology of the hour. . . . And then it was you sprung upon Mr. Meadows the question of the painting of the drawing-room ?"

"That's where the psychology came in," said he.

"No; this is where it comes in, Chris," said she in a low voice, with her face close to his. (Muriel had resumed her work of giving an extra touch of carmine to the rose petals of her picture.) "The true psychology of the incident is the result of your staying at home for the benefit of others; your self-sacrifice could not but meet with its reward. I am so glad—more than glad, dear old Chris!"

"That's what I said," murmured Muriel, without looking away from her picture. "If Chris had not been so eager to do Mr. Forrester a good turn, he would not now be at home, ready to accept Mr. Meadows' gracious offer. If Mr. Forrester owes Chris a good turn, assuredly Chris owes him a much better one."

"That is what I am doing my best to impress upon him," said Joan. "His self-sacrifice has met with its reward—a portion of its reward—the rest has yet to come."

"Yes, the rest will come when I walk through Mr. Meadows' marble halls, and on to the first drawing-room, which will be decorated with dainty boys with bows and quivers, making targets of rose petals—when I hear people say how exquisite is the painting, I shall have my reward," said Chris, "for I shall feel that my dearest has made her mark in the world—her own mark as a worker, not merely in association with another worker."

"And when you stroll through that drawing-room

and find that, in consequence of the well-composed dinner of which you have partaken, you take a roseate view of the roses and do not see a trace of yellow in the faces of the Cupids, I trust you^l will remember what is due to another one who is dear to you—one who, I hope, shall have spent an hour or two in the kitchen attached to that proud mansion,” said Joan. “Oh, my dear Chris, I feel that the effects—psychological as well as logical, which is usually just the opposite—capable of being achieved by a cook are far more profound than those that any other artist can produce. I have felt within the past hour that, slightly altering the aspiration of the philosopher, I may say, ‘Let who will make the laws of my country, so long^a as I can make its salads.’”

“And you do not shrink from attempting a salad,” said Chris, with admiration in his voice. “Give me your hand, Joan; you have the courage of your opinions, and you deserve to succeed.”

But, of course, Lady Humber could scarcely feel otherwise than scandalised, when it was communicated to her that her niece was making a few trifling but essential changes in the structure of one of the linen painting-blouses in order that it might be suitable for wearing in a kitchen where cooking was going on.

Lady Humber was quite willing to go a certain distance, under the influence of her masterful nieces, but she declined to follow Joan into the kitchen.

She had never been quite sure of the house-painting aims of Muriel: it required both the girls to talk to her floridly of the Sistine Chapel and its ceilings, and of the frescoes done by artists occupying the very respectable position of Michelangelo—they were, of course, careful not to pronounce the name Michael Angelo—before she would be convinced that the work was “ladylike.” The repetition of the names of several eminent men went far in assuring her, however, that frescoes were ladylike. She never questioned the social aspects of singing: nearly all the great vocalists were, as are also all the chief actresses in England, the daughters of clergymen. Of this fact she was well aware; but to be asked to descend from the platform of the fresco painter or the light soprano, to the kitchen of the cook, was too much for her.

And yet there were great names forthcoming in this branch of art as well as in the other branches. What about Alexandre Dumas, Joan asked her. Was there a higher name in romance than that of Alexandre Dumas? And what about Brillat-Savarin? Was he not a distinguished *littérateur* as well as an accomplished designer of dishes? And had not Thackeray written the ballad of Bouilleabaisse, quoted in full by every writer since, when mentioning the name Marseilles in any connection? And what about Scott and his pages about the boiling of a salmon and eating it with the accompaniment of whiskey? And had not Benvenuto Cellini himself,

who was the type of everything that was respectable and who worked a great deal for the Church—had not he made a business of cooking at times?

All these cases, alluded to—not without much beating of brains—by Joan, failed to convince Lady Humber that it was “ladylike”—the utterance of the word brought back to the girls the memory of a prospectus which they had once seen of a school where something called “deportment” was among the extras, with something called “the use of the globes”—to hire oneself out as a cook. It was only when Joan assured her that Mrs. Romer would act as her chaperon in kitchen circles that she gave her provisional consent to Joan’s abandoning singing for her friends in favour of cooking for strangers. But Mrs. Romer was not only the daughter of a general—in the War Office’s, not the Registry Office’s acceptance of the rank—but the widow of a lieutenant in the Navy as well, and therefore an irreproachable chaperon, and Lady Humber felt that this was something to be thankful for. Her masterful niece might have insisted on going into strange kitchens and cooking a “vol au vent aux truffes” without thinking it at all necessary to act in accordance with the “convenances” of society.

And so Joan worked away at her blouse in order to have it ready for wearing the next night when she was to drive with Mrs. Romer, as her assistant, to the house on the Cromwell Road where a distinguished financier was giving a little dinner to a

dozen friends, who like himself, had been "bears" in regard to the war, and so had done a good stroke of business, though perhaps not quite so good a stroke as they had hoped to do.

And Muriel continued imparting freshness to the blushes of the damask roses in her picture, which was to be submitted to Mr. Meadows as an example of what she could do.

Two days had, however, passed before Chris said anything further to Mr. Meadows on the subject of the decoration of his drawing-room. He thought that on the whole it would be better for Mr. Meadows to remind him of his promise to procure a sample of the young woman's work about which he had spoken, than for him to remind Mr. Meadows of his promise to examine the specimen that might be submitted to his notice. And, sure enough, Mr. Meadows was the first to speak on the subject. He wondered if the young woman was still free to accept the commission. He had become, as he knew he should be, quite impatient to have the panels painted, he said. Chris did not suggest that the matter had passed out of his own mind. He said that he had seen the artist, and that she was quite pleased to have the opportunity of doing the work. He believed that she was giving some touches to an oval canvas which would convey to Mr. Meadows some idea of her style. Perhaps it would be ready the next day.

"And she may as well estimate for the ten panels at the same time," said Mr. Meadows.

Chris felt that this was business. The transaction would have about it none of that laxity which had characterised Muriel's contract with Mrs. Kirke.

It so happened that he was able to bring the picture to Mr. Meadows the following day, and with it the artist's offer to paint in the style of the sample, the ten panels in the South Audley Street drawing-room for the sum of one hundred and fifty guineas (£157 10s.).

"Let her begin the work at once," said Mr. Meadows. "The woman is an artist. Denbigh & Parr might overrun my house with banditti and garlic for six months without producing anything half so exquisite as this picture. Will you kindly tell her, Foxcroft, that I will trust to her to keep the colours down to the tone of this? I want nothing stronger than those damask rose petals. She needn't be afraid of giving me plenty of rose petals, butterflies, white clouds, and 'Cupid all armed.' Your friend's sister—or is she his daughter?—is an artist."

"I had an idea that she was," said Chris. "I think I let drop a hint to that effect in your hearing."

"You did not do her justice, Foxcroft. You should have raved about her."

"I should," said Chris; "and I would have raved about her too, only that I wanted you to employ her to paint your room."

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was a ridiculous thing to be sure, Joan explained ; but Mr. Meadows had really behaved very well over it. He had recognised the fact that it all happened by the merest chance, and he really did not seem to be prejudiced against Muriel or herself, or indeed—what was a good deal more important—against Chris. Yes, he had undoubtedly behaved very well, and had done his best to place her, as well as Muriel, at her ease with him.

He was quite a nice man, and absurdly young. Why had Chris said nothing about his being so young, she was anxious to know. How was it that she had acquired the notion of Mr. Meadows being an old man—well, at least a middle-aged man—she inquired. Was it because she had heard that he was unmarried that she had fancied he was a middle-aged man ?

Well, perhaps it may have been that. Anyhow, he had not been annoyed, as many another man might easily have been, considering what were the circumstances of the case. Another man might have made a few scathing remarks—"I hope you are making yourself quite at home, madam"—or words to

that effect. "I trust that you are perfectly satisfied with the tone of my piano, because if you are not, I can easily send round the corner to the tuner to come and raise it to concert pitch"—something like that, you know: sarcastic, bitter, scathing. But Mr. Meadows had resisted the temptation; he did not in the least behave as a man in a play embodying such an incident would behave—no, on the contrary, he behaved quite naturally, and he was very nice from first to last. She had no idea that newspaper proprietors were so nice.

"And he even went the length of asking you to come back again?" said Chris, when Joan had finished her account of the incident of the day—an incident the very thought of which made her uncomfortably warm, and the narration of which made her cheeks rosy. Chris had never found her quite so inconsequent in narration—quite so interjectional.

"Oh, yes; he said something about being glad to see me—but not sarcastically. Do you know, I rather wish now that he had been a little sarcastic, and not quite so kind."

"People who are inclined to be kind and not inclined to be sarcastic cannot become sarcastic at a moment's notice, merely to suit the whim of a girl," said Chris. "But he asked you to come back some day?"

"If you tell me that it is his nature to be kind, of course I have nothing more to say," continued Joan, pulling out the stop marked "aggrieved"—

but Chris knew that, after all, it was only the vox humana that gave the inflection to her conversation.

"Mr. Meadows is never irritatingly kind," said Chris. "I think with you that it would have been more satisfactory if he had said something with a cynical bite in it. It would have placed you more at your ease ; you would most likely have hit him to the boundary in the first over. Anyhow, he asked you to come back some day?"

"Yes ; but do you really think that I will go?" she asked with an earnest look in her grey eyes.

"H'm ! No, I don't suppose you will," he replied.

"Then that's just where you make a mistake ; for I will go back—yes, some day," she cried. "Why should I not go with Muriel some day? Tell me that. Do you really suppose that I am likely to be bullied out of the house by his kindness? I don't care how kind he may have been, I will not be deterred by his kindness from keeping my sister company—some day ; and that's all that there is to be said on the subject. Only it was a very silly thing altogether."

"Yes, it was, as you say, a very delightful contretemps ; and I await Mr. Meadows' version of it with great interest," said Chris.

"Oh, he will possibly say to you all the sarcastic things that he left unsaid to me," cried Joan. "You see, he knows that you dare not answer him back."

"Of course ; it would be as much as my place is worth," laughed Chris. "I am only an employé."

So is Muriel. She dare not answer back either. I wonder that he wasn't sarcastic to her. It would have been much more effective. Somehow a battery of stored-up sarcasm lacks sparkle. It would not develop an energy of twenty volts; and a sixteen-candle sarcasm is worth nothing as an illuminant of the situation. I am not afraid of meeting Mr. Meadows again, whatever you may be."

"Good heavens! Do you suggest that I—I—am afraid of meeting him?" asked Joan. "Didn't I say just now that I would go back to his house with Muriel—some day?"

"Yes; but all the same you won't go," said he. "The only way of taming animals is by the constant exercise of kindness. If you are constantly and patiently kind to any animal, it will come to trust you implicitly. And that is what makes it all the stranger that no woman will trust a man who is unflinchingly kind to her. I suppose it must be the result of the survival of some memory of prehistoric woman. She loved the prehistoric man best when he had hit her on the head with a stone club. Heavens! Are you still prehistoric, Joan?"

"Thank goodness, here is the tea at last," replied Joan.

"I am answered," said he.

* * * * *

But it was undoubtedly a very ridiculous thing that had happened that very day, when Muriel had gone to her work at the panels in Mr. Meadows' drawing-

room. She had already been painting at them for a week, and she had not yet seen Mr. Meadows, the fact being that he had gone to Paris for the opening of the Exhibition, and had business in Paris which would, Chris told her, occupy him for some weeks. She was in the habit of going, as would an ordinary decorator, to the house in South Audley Street, at nine o'clock in the morning, and working on till two, when she put away her blouse in a corner and went home for lunch, and did not return until the next day ; for she had been advised that five hours' work was as much as she should allow herself to do ; that being equal, considering that she worked continuously, and did not pause at intervals to smoke and to read *Tit Bits*, to the ten hours' day of the tradesunion decorator.

The only condition under which she worked that interfered with her sense of comfort, was her isolation. She had no one to "keep her company," she said. Only once through the day did a servant enter the room, to put coals on the fire ; and Muriel soon began to find that the loneliness was apt to get on her nerves. That was why she asked Joan to come with her one day, and remain for an hour or two while she was doing her work ; and Joan, not having to go out with Mrs. Romer until the following evening, said she would be very pleased to go with her ; and she went, taking with her note paper and a reservoir pen, for the purpose of writing to her brother, who was now at Bloemfontein.

Having written her letter, and finding herself within an hour of the time of Muriel's departure, she had criticised the panel at which her sister was working, giving, with a yawn, a little friendly advice regarding the curve of one of Cupid's wings, and had then gone through the arch, made for a curtain, just beyond where Muriel was working, into the second drawing-room, which contained no furniture except a grand piano which was swathed in baize.

"I suppose the house may be considered uninhabited," she remarked to Muriel.

"It is quite uninhabited; only a servant or two," said Muriel.

"I hope they will not take exception to my trying Mr. Meadows' piano," said Joan, working at the tapes that fastened the baize cover.

"I am not sure that you have any right to try a piano in a strange house," suggested Muriel.

"But when the house is uninhabited?"

"Well, perhaps that does make a difference. I am not sure."

"You should have made yourself conversant with the ethics of the house painter—the etiquette of the paper-hangman," said Joan. "Have you never heard these people singing at their work—or rather singing while pretending to work—at least whistling?"

"Oh, I daresay, but——"

"I don't see that I should be laying 'myself open to a reproof from the butler if I were to touch the

notes. However, I won't do 'it,'" said Joan, and she did it not.

But she did it next day. She had become familiarised with the situation, which had seemed strange before ; and even Muriel, who was extremely fastidious in all matters involving a question of good taste, offered no remonstrance when she opened the piano and ran her fingers along the keys. She felt that they were, to all intents and purposes, in an uninhabited house. Mr. Meadows was on the Continent, and only a few servants were in the lower regions—most likely asleep, for it was shortly after the hour of noon, and valued servants know that there is no better way of making their digestion sure than by indulging in a half-hour's doze before the mid-day meal.

Was there any reason why it should be accounted bold or presumptuous on her part to run her fingers over the keys of the piano? Why, there was no one in the house who could act as censor of her act. She might work out the musical tornado of a Paderewski or the blizzard of De Pachmann without any one being the wiser, and she had no notion of making an attempt to realise the meteorology of such cataclysms. She ran her fingers, without a reproach from her sister, over the notes until she had found out a melody, and then she made a remark as to the fulness of the tone of the instrument. She began to trifle with it—as girls do with strange pianos. She coquetted with the highest octave of

the treble all the time that she was battering on the bass, and then she played tricks with chords, making them believe that she was ready to join all her soul to theirs, and just as they were being overcome with passionate entreaty, flying away from them into the colourless inanities of a recent success in that nondescript thing known as musical comedy.

"It is a splendid instrument!" she sang to Muriel, striking the bold confident notes of "*Regnavi nell' silenzio*," and then rushing off into "*Casta Diva*." She gave out the opening phrases with all their splendour, and when she reached the highest note, she dwelt on it. She held it till it was ringing round the empty room, and then she allowed it to slip away from her until the sound that trickled through the air was that of a fountain heard through a rose-brake. And then the fascination of the emptiness and the bare wall and the undraped windows was too much for her. She sang the "*Casta Diva*" as it should be sung; and she knew that she had never sung it so well before, because she had never sung it in such favourable circumstances before.

She flooded the rooms with it, and its waves swept Muriel off her ladder, so that she stood with her palette in her hand, listening, as she leant against the farthest of the fireplaces.

And the painter saw before her eyes the picture of a girl playing with pearls—thousands of pearls—in the sunlight of a garden of lilies, and every pearl became iridescent in the sunlight; and sometimes

they flashed and fell into the quivering waters of a fountain that rippled through a marble basin, and the ripples sent back pearls of their own into the light, and she could not tell which were the gems and which the drops of water. And then, with the change of key in the melody, there came before her a picture suffused with twilight instead of sunlight, and out in the distance of the blue vesper sky there hung the thin crescent of a moon that 'was not silver but glass, and just above a purple mountain peak there glowed tremulously through the air the Evening Star, and both moon and star were reflected in the polished steel surface of a still water surrounded by reeds, and no voice of man was heard in that land.

The singer ended, and the artist awoke.

Muriel gave a sigh, and laid down her palette and sheaf of brushes.

"What a fool any one is to try to paint a picture when there is such a medium as music in the world!" she said. "If I could reproduce the pictures that you brought before me I should be the greatest artist in the world."

And then she turned her head and saw that a man whose face was alight with interest, was standing at the open door, looking at her and glancing in the direction of the arch, beyond which the singer was hidden.

Muriel had, without any particular reason, formed the idea long ago that Mr. Meadows was a middle-

aged, if not an elderly man ; and the man who now took a step into the room, was certainly not within ten years of being middle-aged, and yet she knew perfectly well that he was Mr. Meadows.

“ I hope I may be permitted to see what you have done,” he said. “ And may I also hope that——”

But the sound of a strange voice had reached Joan, and she jumped up from the packing-case which she had used as a piano stool and stood in the arch between the rooms, staring, red as a rose as to her face, at the man who was staring at her.

She saw that his face was quite as rosy as she felt her own to be.

And she, too, knew at once that he was Mr. Meadows.

CHAPTER XXIV

"I AM afraid that—that—my sister . . . but we were made to believe that the house was uninhabited just now, and these rooms being empty, we thought that—that—perhaps . . . I am sure that we should apologise for opening the piano."

Muriel was arranging her brushes while she was speaking. She felt exactly as she had done a good many years before, when a faithful governess had discovered her in the still-room at Selwood, sampling the pots of new-made jam, and with her pinafore coloured like the palette she now held in her hand, only in less subdued tones.

"Why should you apologise?" said Mr. Meadows. "You were only the audience, and so was I. If any one should apologise for being an auditor I should do so, the fact being that I was unauthorised. But I don't feel called on to make an apology, only to—thank the singer." He went toward Joan, saying, "I hope that you will allow me to compliment you on your idea of 'Casta Diva,' Miss—Miss . . . I'm afraid that I was idiotic enough to neglect asking Foxcroft what your name is, Miss—Miss——"

Here he looked toward Muriel. After all, she was the one with whom he was doing business: he had not entered into a contract with the other one to sing; he rather wished now that he had.

"Selwood—our name is Selwood," said the business one swiftly. "I have got one panel done; I am working at the second. That is the finished one. I hope you don't think the sky between the clouds too blue."

She clearly meant to talk business. She pointed to the finished panel, and stood before it. She feared as she looked at the blue spaces between the lace-work of the filmy clouds that he would say the word which sprang to her lips—the word "Reckitt's."

"It will not be so blue in another month," said he. "And in any case it is as well that we who live in London should be reminded that the sky is blue somewhere. The rest of the colouring—charming—quite charming—full of tenderness and delicacy; and the design—why, it is quite exquisite, Miss Selwood. When Foxcroft showed me the canvas which you submitted to me, I told him that he should have raved to me about you. He was wise enough to refrain from raving."

"I am so glad that you are satisfied—sir," said the artist. It only occurred to her at the last moment to say that "sir," and she said it just a little too late, so that any one would have known that she had never before in her life addressed a man as "sir."

The man who occupied this unique position laughed, and so did Joan—she was pulling on her gloves and buttoning them carefully, giving a glance now and again to the door of the room behind her. She had a vague idea that if the employer were to become greatly interested in his criticism of the work of the employed, she might be able to escape behind him with masterly unostentatiousness. She had inherited an appreciation of the strategical possibilities of a situation.

But he did not seem ready to give her such a chance. He had turned to look at her even before Muriel had said "Sir."

"Foxcroft did not say a word about singing," remarked Mr. Meadows.

"Oh!" said the singer, "why should he say anything about singing? If you had asked him to recommend you to a singer, he would probably have mentioned—some one else—may be, Melba."

"Yes; most likely Melba," said he. "You do not sing under your own name, Miss Selwood. I would have been certain to remember it."

"I am not a professional singer," said she; "though I was one for a fortnight," she added. "I was a failure."

"Oh, you were a failure?" said he. "Did you ever sing 'Casta Diva' in public?"

"No; when I sang for money I was bound down body and soul to something they called a 'coon song,'" said she.

"And you failed over the 'coon song'? I congratulate you," said he.

"I can't really say that I failed so far as the actual singing was concerned," said she, with some conscientiousness. "No, I only failed to get the money without writing humiliating letters. That is why I ceased to sing professionally."

"And it appears to me to be quite a sufficient reason ; you know more about musical than mercantile art," said he. "And may I ask if you have taken up any other form of art as a profession?"

"Oh, I am a cook now," she replied. "I get paid regularly and without humiliation as a cook."

"That is satisfactory," said he, without emotion. She thought that his voice would change colour when he heard that he was chatting to a menial ; but it did not do so. "Yes," he continued thoughtfully, "I have heard that people who would be indignant at the imputation of neglecting to pay their cooks, would be equally indignant were a professional singer or a professional painter or a professional pianist to ask them for the money they owe them. And that is why you became a cook, Miss Selwood?"

"Yes ; you see there are plenty of singers, but too few cooks," said she.

"That is true enough, indeed," he assented. "And then—then"—he appeared to be thinking what he could say to her still further to emphasise his view of the profession of cookery—"then, it must not

be forgotten that the cook's is the most spiritual of all the arts."

"Oh, I am afraid it is sometimes forgotten," said she. "As a matter of fact, I don't think that I ever remembered it—I really never heard that before."

"But it is true," said he. "We owe all our ideas of the spirit world to cooks. Do you fancy that any one ever saw a ghost—and dozens of people have seen dozens of ghosts—except through the agency of a cook? The idea cannot be maintained for a moment. The seeing of a spirit is altogether dependent upon the condition of one's eyesight; and the condition of one's eyesight upon one's diet. It was the unscientific cookery of the middle ages that originated the idea of unhappy spirits and their place of abode. Personally, I have known of a house being haunted by ghosts for years, until one strong-minded clergyman, who was consulted on the question of exorcising them, began his operations by exorcising the cook. She cleared out, and took the ghosts with her *batterie de cuisine*."

"Cooks and spooks—I had no idea that there was so close a connection between the two," cried Joan. "I feel greatly comforted to know that I forsook the materialism of vocalism for the spiritism of cooking."

"It must be your aim to make men less visionary," said he. "But in that case, you must be careful that no one overhears your singing. There is a

good deal to be said in favour of music as a spiritual influence."

"Would you place it next to cookery, Mr. Meadows?" she asked with great seriousness. "If, for instance, you heard awful shrieks sounding through the empty rooms of your house, would you give your cook a month's notice, or would you turn out the vocalist whom you found lurking about the passages?"

She was actually talking to him now as if he were an ordinary acquaintance whom she had met at dinner, and not the employer, whom her sister had very properly addressed as "Sir"; and so interested had she become that she did not notice the expression on the face of her sister at the change in her attitude in regard to Mr. Meadows.

"I think," said Mr. Meadows, "that, in respect of your problem, if I found that the cook and the vocalist were combined in the same individual, I should ask her—what she thought of the piano. I wonder, by the way, what you think of the piano, Miss Selwood?"

Joan laughed, and her laugh rang like a song through the empty rooms.

"I think that it is my time for leaving off work," said Muriel. "I hope that I did not take a liberty in asking my sister to come with me here while I am doing my painting, Mr. Meadows," she added, adopting more severely than before the somewhat constrained attitude of the employée in addressing

the employer. She felt that it was necessary for her to become more strenuously formal in order to counteract the undue familiarity of Joan. Joan was treating him as an equal, whereas he was Mr. Meadows and they were but——

“I hope that you will bring your sister every day—that is, as often as she is good enough to come,” said he. “And I hope that she will not neglect her vocalism for the sake of her cooking. I consider that my having the piano here was very fortunate. I daresay, if you are kind enough to pay the house another visit, I shall manage to find a more suitable piano stool than the one you were forced to use. By the way, you have not yet told me what you thought of the piano, Miss Selwood.”

He had turned once more to Joan. Joan had been conscious of the rebuke administered to her volubility by the changed tone of Muriel's voice, so she now said quite formally and without enthusiasm—enthusiasm is quite out of place between employer and employée,—

“I am sure that it could not be surpassed. I think it was the brilliancy of the tone of the piano that lured me on to sing. Of course I felt sure that the house was quite empty. These rooms were, at any rate. There are some people who cannot be trusted alone in an empty room. No matter how poor one's voice may be it sounds quite operatic if the room is only big enough and empty enough.”

“Operatic?” said he. “You are not going far. I

have heard singers in opera, and if you were to place them in any room of people and they were to sing, the room would soon become empty enough. I hope you will come back—as often as you please ; and sing as often as—as I please. You must find your work lonely, Miss Selwood”—he had turned to Muriel, who was folding up her painting-blouse.

“Of course I like having my sister with me,” said she.

“Of course—only—Well, you are a cook”—he had gone back to Joan. “Are you out of a place just now ? ”

She caught up the thread of his smile where he dropped it, but he held on to the other end ; it was a silken bond between them.

“I am in just too good a place now,” said she. “I am an assistant to a lady who goes out to cook dinners that are meant to be very *recherché*.”

“I fancy I have heard of that lady—her name is Mrs. Romer,” said he. “Is not that her name ? ”

“Yes. Of course, I am not nearly so good as she is ; every *plat* that she has is absolutely unique. You will never see it on any carte except such as she prepares. I have only six altogether ; but these are also unattainable without me. I have one salad of my own,” she added in a spirit of vainglory.

“I hope you may be able to retain the copyright,” said he. “A salad is the sonnet of the cuisine. It must be exquisite—short—complete in ‘itself down to the faintest flavour. It should have the savour

of a sonnet, and convey the same idea that a sonnet conveys to the appreciative. And it should be equally beautiful to the eye as to the ear."

"Oh," she sighed, "all that I can claim for my salad is that it is the violin obbligato to a song by Gounod."

He laughed, and Muriel gave another glance at Joan—a glance that defined the relative positions of the employer and the employée—it was meant even to include the position of the employée's sister. She said,

"Now I am ready, Joan."

He opened the door of the room for them, but refrained from shaking hands with either of them. He felt, and so did they, that there would be a suggestion of patronage in its worst sense, in the act.

"I cannot speak too highly of your work, Miss Selwood," he said to Muriel when they were all at the head of the staircase together. "The colouring, the design, the drawing of the figures—it would be impossible to say too much about all that you have done."

"I was only afraid of that bit of blue sky," said Muriel.

"You need not be afraid of bringing a bit of blue sky into my house, Miss Selwood," said he; and now he was not smiling, but was quite serious.

He saw them downstairs, and a footman opened the glass door of the porch.

* . * * * *

And this was the incident of the day, which Joan

had described with such vivid incoherence to Chris, when she and her sister had eaten their lunch.

And then the coming of the tea and the little hot cakes had brought Muriel back to the room, where she had only been part of the time while Joan was complaining of the silliness of the incident of being caught by such a man as Mr. Meadows in the act of flooding his empty rooms with unauthorised song.

“Yes, I think that, on the whole, he should have been bitter—epigrammatically bitter,” said Joan, musingly, while Chris was explaining something to Muriel on the subject of the operations which had begun east of Bloemfontein, with a view of intercepting the Boers, who were showing a certain amount of anxiety to trek from the Free State to the Transvaal. Somehow, Joan seemed to be thinking more than was Muriel about the contretemps—Muriel had alluded to it as a contretemps—of the day; and this was not without its queer side; for it did not matter anything to Joan if Mr. Meadows thought her bold and forward—she had nothing to lose, whatever he might think. It was Muriel who might have forfeited her commission, if Mr. Meadows had chosen to think that she had taken a liberty in introducing one of her relatives into his house without first asking his permission to do so. But Muriel had contented herself with saying a few severe things to her sister about her thoughtlessness in starting her singing, and then upon her forget-

fulness of the fact that their relations with Mr. Meadows were—well, as she had defined them in more than one glance. But Joan was not content with an expression of hope that her attitude in regard to Mr. Meadows would not prejudice him against her sister, who wanted to make a good deal of money out of him, she had gone on to express her honest doubt if the sister of the employée stood on the same plane as the employée herself, and had then talked for half an hour to Chris about the whole matter.

And now she was returning to it again.

“Yes; I think it would, on the whole, have been pleasanter for us all if he had been sarcastic,” she said. “Is he ever sarcastic with you, Chris?”

“Is who ever sarcastic with me?” asked Chris.

“Heavens! Whom were we talking about, if not Mr. Meadows?” she cried.

“But I thought we had finished talking about Mr. Meadows,” said he. “Is he sarcastic with me? Of course he is not. You see, he pays me a pretty large salary now and I keep him under my thumb in that way. If a man pays you a big enough salary, you can always terrorise him in that way. It is only with the men you pay two pounds a week to that you can afford to be sarcastic.”

“I don’t quite see what a question of salary has to do with it,” said Joan, after a thoughtful pause,

“That is because you are an extremely ignorant young woman,” said he.

"I had no notion that newspaper proprietors were such young men," said she, musingly.

"They are not," said he.

"How old do you think Mr. Meadows is?" she inquired with extreme carelessness.

"Oh, I should say about fifty-two or three," said he.

"Nonsense!" she cried, not without a suggestion of indignation. "Why, he has not got a grey hair in his head."

"Well, I admit that does look suspicious," said he. "But he cannot be more than a year or two over what I say."

Joan said nothing further about Mr. Meadows that day.

CHAPTER XXV

A FEW days later Chris got a note from Mr. Vickers marked "confidential." It embodied a request that Mr. Foxcroft would have the goodness to make an appointment with the writer with a view to consider a rather important point in connection with the Selwood property. Mr. Vickers would be happy to place himself at the disposal of Mr. Foxcroft at any hour and place that would be convenient to the latter.

Mr. Foxcroft begged leave to acknowledge receipt of Mr. Vickers' communication and ventured to suggest that Mr. Vickers' office offered a convenient place for talking over any matter of business, and he hoped that between the hours of three and four o'clock on the following day would suit Mr. Vickers' arrangements.

During the remainder of that day and up to three o'clock on the next, Chris was left to guess what was the particular point upon which Mr. Vickers wanted to consult him. His first thought was, naturally, that the solicitor was anxious to induce him to make an effort to influence the two daughters of Colonel Selwood in favour of Mr. Mellor as a

tenant; and up to the moment of his setting out for Lincoln's Inn Fields, he could not suggest to himself any other object that Mr. Vickers could possibly have for a consultation with him alohe.

He felt sure that Mellor was not the sort of man to abandon at the first rebuff his intention of leasing one of the finest places in England. He rather fancied that he appreciated some traits in the character of Mr. Mellor. He knew that if Mr. Mellor had made up his mind to lease Selwood, he would not allow himself to be set aside on account of any prejudice that a couple of girls might have against his personality. It was not by his supersensitiveness that Mellor had succeeded in life. If Nature had dealt more parsimoniously with the rhinoceros in regard to the thickness of its skin, that animal would have ceased long ago to occupy the commanding position it at present holds in the jungle. If the hippopotamus were affected by the sharpness of the jagged points of the aloes through which it occasionally passes, the class pachydermata would long ago have been diminished by one of its most ponderous examples.

And, then, nearly all pachydermata have found it to their advantage to add still further to the thickness of their skin by rolling themselves in mud and allowing it to cake upon them. These rudimentary earthworks they find very protective.

That was another trait which Mr. Mellor had in common with his brother pachyderms. He had

early accustomed himself to the mud bath ; and every one knows that the value of the mud bath is becoming gradually recognised in modern therapeutics. He had found out by a continuous series of experiments, that, so far from suffering by an intimate contact with mud, he had actually benefited by its caking on him ; and so, as Chris Foxcroft knew, he had not considered himself to be greatly hurt when Colonel Selwood had kicked his chair from under him—Chris had been made acquainted with the exact facts of this incident—and assuredly he would not feel deeply wounded by any refusal on the part of Colonel Selwood's daughters to countenance his offer to lease to him the place on which he had set his mind.

Chris knew that Mellor had good reason for believing in the power of money to overcome the prejudices of men and women, no matter what those prejudices were directed against. What about the Duke of Cinque Ports? Was it possible that he had taken kindly to Mr. Mellor from the first? And Lord de Crecy and Poitiers—did he find himself drawn to Mr. Mellor by any common sympathies? He declined to do these distinguished members of the Peerage the injustice of believing that they had been prejudiced otherwise than against Mellor ; and yet he had by his money induced them to become his most intimate associates, and to feel proud of his patronage.

These, and many other cases, had proved to

Mr. Mellor—if he had ever had a doubt on the matter—that his money could accomplish everything that he sought to accomplish ; and he had therefore made up his mind that all that the daughters of Selwood needed to break down their opposition to him as a tenant of their historic house was an increase of his original offer for the five years' lease. To live beneath the roof of a great historic house even for five years, would go far toward making him historical, Mr. Mellor felt. And Chris knew it. Therefore he went to keep his appointment, feeling certain that Mr. Vickers could have no surprise in store for him.

"I have asked you to favour me with this interview, Mr. Foxcroft," said the lawyer, "because I fancy that two men of business, such as we are, can look at the business aspects of a matter that should be looked at from no other standpoint, very much more easily if we are alone than if the young ladies were present."

"I am certain of that, Mr. Vickers," said Chris, and he was certain of it. He thought so highly of the young ladies as to be quite positive on this point.

"I knew that you would agree with me," said Mr. Vickers. "The fact is that neither of the young ladies understands business as you and I understand it, Mr. Foxcroft."

"You pay them a graceful compliment, Mr. Vickers."

"Well, perhaps—but, for that matter, the Selwood family—but it is all a matter of training, I suppose :

an appreciation of business does not come all at once."

"It would be a terrible thing if it did, Mr. Vickers."

"No; I am not a believer in instantaneous conversions. Men do not gather figs from thistles. You cannot put new wine into old bottles and—and so forth. You remember what the gardener in one of the quadrangles at Oxford said when an American visitor asked him for a recipe for such a perfect lawn?—'You have nothing to do except water it day and night and keep it well rolled for three hundred years and the lawn will be all right.' Well, one could adapt the story to the making of a business man."

"Or the making of a gentleman."

"Mr. Foxcroft, it is much easier to turn a business man into a gentleman than it is to turn a gentleman into a business man."

"That is rather fortunate—considering that there are so many more applicants among business men who want to be made gentlemen than among gentlemen who want to be made business men."

Chris was now quite positive that Mr. Vickers was anxious to influence him on the subject of some new offer from Mr. Mellor for the Selwood lease.

"Yes," continued he, wishing to make the man's work easier for him. "Yes; there is that Mr. Mellor, for instance; he has had no difficulty in obtaining the amplest recognition as a gentleman. I suppose

the association of one's name with that of a peer in the flotation of a company is quite sufficient to obtain for any one the amplest recognition as a gentleman. But Mr. Mellor is in the habit of slapping peers on the back and calling them 'old chap'; so that, just as some of these peers have two or three extra titles that they have no use for, Mellor's claim is reduplicated. He does not merely get a pass degree, he takes a double first."

"I am glad we have got upon Mr. Mellor," said Mr. Vickers. "I was just coming to him. Mr. Foxcroft, I think it right to tell you—in confidence, of course—that the Selwood estate is in a very much worse condition financially than the young ladies believe it to be in—it is even worse than their father has any notion of."

"I feared as much, Mr. Vickers."

"Ah; you have not closed your eyes to the possibilities—the very grave possibilities of the situation. It is all very well to give instructions to pay that army of servants week after week—outdoor servants, indoor servants—those people with the ridiculous names—but where is the money to come from? If I continue paying the servants up to the end of the year, I shall not have enough left to pay the interest on all the mortgages; and then—Heaven knows what then, Mr. Foxcroft."

Mr. Vickers raised his hands above his head. The attitude had some subtle patriarchal suggestion about it in Chris's eyes—was it the print of Moses in the

act of blessing the Congregation? or was it Elisha the Prophet in the act of watching the departure of Elijah?

He shook his head, and then nodded slowly, to show Mr. Vickers that he was a sympathetic auditor.

"The young ladies assumed an attitude of hostility to Mr. Mellor which grieved me greatly," continued the lawyer, "knowing as I do what is coming, and having, as I have, the best interests of the estate at heart. They would not listen to any suggestion of a proposal for Mr. Mellor to become the tenant of Selwood."

"I am afraid that I looked at the question from their standpoint also," said Chris.

"You did, Mr. Foxcroft, and I must say that your doing so surprised me. Mr. Foxcroft, let me tell you that the attitude of the young ladies has only delayed by a year or two the entrance of Mr. Mellor, not as a tenant but as the owner of Selwood."

Mr. Vickers spoke with great solemnity, leaning across his desk with outstretched hand and a finger upraised. He meant to impress his visitor, and he succeeded amply. Chris was almost made afraid.

"You tell me that Mellor—owner—owner of Selwood—Mellor," he said, and his voice faltered; it had taken its tone from his heart. His heart had stood still at the terrible picture Mr. Vickers had painted for him. Chris had, since the days of his childhood, thought of Selwood as the consolidation of all things solid. It was told of him that once,

when he had reached his theological period—he was between ten and twelve—he had questioned the Rector on some points in the Apocalypse. Yes, his father had said, in the Dies Irae everything in the world would be destroyed utterly.

“What,” he had cried, “and Selwood too? Oh, no; not Selwood.”

His faith was shaken in a prophecy which represented such indiscrimination of judgment as to include in the scheme of general annihilation the destruction of Selwood.

That was the feeling which prevailed throughout the county; and Chris positively felt its influence upon him now that Mr. Vickers assured him that, “Mene—mene—tekel—upharsin” was written, if not on the walls of Selwood, on the parchments which Mr. Vickers kept in his strong room.

Then Mr. Vickers got upon his feet and raised one hand while he spoke—Chris recognised his gesture as that of the angel in the picture—the angel who swore that Time should be no more.

“Mr. Foxcroft, I tell you honestly that I know no way by which the sale of Selwood can be averted, unless we obtain a tenant for the mansion, or at least for some of the farms. The application will be made to one of her Majesty’s judges and in due course an order will be made for the sale of the property, and you may be sure that Mellor will buy it. He has set his heart on it.”

Then Mr. Vickers sat down. There was no need

for him to stand any longer. The angel had spoken his prophecy.

"Mr. Mellor is still anxious to become a tenant?" said Chris, after a reasonable pause. It would have been indecent for him to speak immediately after an Apocalyptic utterance.

"He might be brought back to it," replied Mr. Vickers. "It is quite possible that he might be led gently up to consider the matter again. Of course I had to resort to evasion in my answer to his agent regarding the negotiations for the tenancy of the mansion. I believe I said that I had found that no steps could be taken until the return of Colonel Selwood from South Africa. But I have had an interview with Mr. Mellor himself since I wrote."

"With a view to induce Colonel Selwood's daughters to look at the matter from a purely business standpoint?"

"Well, not exactly. He said, of course, that it was a pity I had not found out how I stood in regard to the letting of the property, before commencing negotiations. He had sent his surveyor down to Selwood, and these things are not done without the expenditure of money."

"That is perfectly true."

"He then said that his surveyor had reported to him regarding Drellincourt Farm, and a pretty bad report it was that he had received."

"Which proves that his surveyor was a competent

Mr. Vickers smiled sadly.

"The young ladies were extremely anxious that nothing should be concealed from a possible tenant in respect of that farm," said he. "They were under the impression that I might try to prove it to be a marvel of fertility."

"I did not think that there would be much ground for anxiety in regard to this particular matter," said Chris. "Well, I suppose that his surveyor's report put Mellor altogether off the idea of the farm?"

"Curiously enough," said Mr. Vickers, "the unfavourable character of the report seems to have stimulated him to get the better of that farm."

"You amaze me."

"Most people would certainly feel amazed to hear that a business man such as Mr. Mellor would be willing. . . . But if I mistake not, I gave the young ladies to understand that there was a possibility of his taking the farm out of pure—that is——"

"Pure cussedness—that is the word you are looking for. Yes, you did undoubtedly suggest that there were men with theories of high farming and the rest."

"I thought you would recollect. It requires one to know men if one hopes to attain success in my profession, Mr. Foxcroft. Yes, Mr. Mellor seems to be positively attracted to Drellincourt Farm on account of the difficulties it presents to him. He

has—happily for us—a farming fad, and he would like to be able to point to Drellincourt as a proof of his capacity. To take up a farm that has been unlet for years—that has cost its proprietor between ten and twelve thousand pounds, to say nothing of the loss of rental, trying to work it up to a paying point—and to make a great success out of it, would be an enterprize after Mr. Mellor's own heart."

"He would boast of it for the rest of his life. And he actually made you an offer for the farm?"

"He made us what I consider a handsome offer for it, Mr. Foxcroft—but, of course, to a man with Mr. Mellor's wealth an extra ten or twenty thousand pounds is nothing. I suggested—without prejudice, of course, and subject to my obtaining the consent of my clients—the sum of thirty thousand pounds as the selling price of the farm with the buildings and machinery, and he said he thought that twenty thousand was too much for it. Well, after some talk and a certain amount of firmness on my part and obstinacy on his, we parted on the understanding that he would give twenty-five thousand pounds for the title-deeds."

"I had no notion that Mellor was equal to that," said Chris. "I thought of him as a practical man—a prosaic man."

"Now, Mr. Foxcroft, do you not agree with me that it would be flying in the face of Providence to reject such an offer as that simply on a point of sentiment?"

"Simply because Colonel Selwood found it necessary to kick the chair from under him? I do agree with you most cordially, Mr. Vickers; and I think that Colonel Selwood's daughters' will also look at the matter in this light. You see, my dear Mr. Vickers, there is a considerable difference between selling a perfectly worthless farm like Drellincourt and leasing a historic house like Selwood—a house every room in which, every corner in which, every stone of which has its associations so far as the family of Selwood are concerned."

"Undoubtedly. Still, young women are young women."

"Sometimes."

"Ah, I daresay you would suggest that they are sometimes angels, Mr. Foxcroft."

"Not I, Mr. Vickers. Angels have no sense of humour; whereas young women—but if we begin to talk of young women in all their aspects—— Well, I suppose you dine about eight? Mr. Vickers, I congratulate you on your adroitness in performing an almost impossible task. I think I may provisionally agree to do my best to induce Miss Selwood and her sister to agree to Mellor's offer. Of course something may occur to alter the view I take of the transaction, but just now I think with you that such a chance may not occur again."

"Take my word for it, Mr. Foxcroft, it will never occur again. I knew that you would look at the transaction in its proper light, and without

prejudice. After all, Mr. Mellor is a man of great capacity."

"And so is a shark, Mr. Vickers. The question to be considered has, happily, no bearing on Mr. Mellor's capacity."

Chris shook hands with Mr. Vickers and went away.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT first there was no thought in Chris Foxcroft's mind except that Mr. Vickers had proved himself quite worthy of the confidence which the Selwood family reposed in him. It was unquestionably a feat to arrange for the sale of a farm which was a good deal worse than worthless, at a price which only an exceptionally good property would fetch, and Chris felt that it would be, as Mr. Vickers had suggested, flying in the face of a benign Providence, who had decreed that such men as Mr. Mellor should have a weak point in their nature, to refuse to sell the farm simply because the purchaser was a man whom some people thought objectionable.

For a day or two he took this view of the matter ; and then a bacillus of doubt found its way into his optimism, causing him to ask himself if Mr. Mellor was really the sort of man who would be likely so far to forget an insult, offered to him by a man much weaker, financially, than himself, as to cause him to do such a man an extremely good turn.

He felt that it was quite easy to imagine Mellor's having a burning desire to take the place of the man

who had insulted him, in that man's house—to turn him out of the house with which his family had been connected for hundreds of years, and to sit at the head of his table in his place. Such an aspiration would be quite a legitimate one to be possessed by a man like Mellor, and it would be quite consistent with the view Chris took of his character to imagine his paying a large sum of money annually for this gratification. But it was not so easily conceivable that such a man as Mellor would be ready to pay a considerable sum of money for a farm which the man who had insulted him would certainly be delighted to get rid of—a farm, moreover, which Mellor must know, if his surveyor was worth anything, could never be successfully worked.

It could be believed that Mellor would be content to pay a considerable sum for the wretched farm, provided that he got a lease of the Mansion of Selwood. To live even for the limited space of five years at Selwood, would confer a certain amount of distinction on Mellor; but what distinction would accrue to him even if he were to succeed in making Drellincourt to blossom as the rose?

People in the neighbourhood of Drellincourt Farm would say that he was a capable man; but was this the sort of fame that Mr. Mellor would cherish? Was he the kind of man who would think the commendation of a few rustics outside the alehouse, worth an immediate outlay of twenty-five thousand pounds, with a prospect of as much more money

being dug into the strangely ungenerous soil of that particular farm ?

Of course Mr. Vickers, who supposed that he thoroughly understood men and their motives, had talked airily of Mellor's fad for farming, and of twenty or thirty thousand pounds being nothing to Mellor ; but Chris, who fancied that he also had a fair working acquaintance with men and their peculiarities, found trouble in believing that Mr. Mellor would be ready to pay more than the market price for the privilege of practising any fad that he might have ; and as for his indifference to money in any transaction—well, the man who, for the sake of pocketing a few bank shares, would not shrink from such a trick as he had resorted to in the transaction with Colonel Selwood, was certainly not the man who was recklessly indifferent to money.

That was how the bacillus of doubt, which found its way into Chris Foxcroft's brain when he set himself about the serious business of considering the question of Mellor's offer, began to spread, until he felt quite worried over the whole business and greatly inclined to wish, either that Colonel Selwood had not entrusted him with the duty of advising his daughters, or that he could bring himself to take a more restricted view than he did of his responsibility in his quasi-trusteeship.

He did not say anything to the girls about Mellor's offer ; but on the Saturday after his interview with the solicitor, he felt himself overpowered by a longing

to revisit the home of his boyhood ; and so he took a return ticket to the village of Husbandman's Selwood, reaching the little wayside station between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

And before he got to his destination, he found that the bacillus had multiplied exceedingly—owing to the fact that, when the train crawled into the tiny station of Drellincourt, he saw on the opposite platform, Mr. Mellor himself, engaged in earnest conversation with a gentleman of a severely scientific cast of countenance. Chris felt convinced that he had seen a picture of this gentleman in some of the illustrated papers or perhaps a magazine, but he could not recollect at the moment what name had been printed below it. He carried the black bag of the conspirator, and he was smiling the quiet smile of the professor of an exact science—it might be mathematics, or philology, or theology, or biology. His smile was the smile of the cocksure.

And Mr. Mellor was talking to him, laying his hand on the sleeve of his coat, though really the man did not look like one who meant to run away.

Then the up train ran into the station, and Chris, while his own train on the opposite side of the platform was in the act of starting, saw Mr. Mellor and his companion take their seats in a first-class compartment.

All that he had seen tended to increase the mystery of Mr. Mellor's proceedings in connection with the purchase of Drellincourt Farm ; nor was

Chris's interest in the matter decreased, when, in the course of the day, he drove from the Rectory to the office of Colonel Selwood's farm bailiff, and learned from him that Mr. Mellor had paid that morning his third visit to Drellincourt Farm, and that he had for his companion a gentleman whom he called Mr. Jevons.

"I hope you didn't say all the bad you know about the farm," said Chris. "No doubt Mr. Vickers let you know that there is a prospect of Mr. Mellor's buying the place."

"I kept my mouth shut as close as possible, sir," said the bailiff. "But, bless you, Mr. Chris, there was no temptation for me to say a word."

"What! they didn't cross-question you about the various fields, or ask you what crops were the most noted failures?" asked Chris.

"Not a word did they ask me, sir. When the surveyor came down ten days ago he put a heap of questions to me as we drove round; but when we came to the thirty-acre field—the worst bit of the lot—he said, 'Hallo, what's this?' 'Oh,' said I, 'that's a bit we tried with mangolds. I wouldn't advise any one to plant mangolds there again. We'll be round at the Fallow Dip in a minute.' 'Just stop for a moment, and let me down,' said he. Well, what could I do under the circumstances, Mr. Chris? He wouldn't be put off with my talk about Fallow Dip, that I said would grow any crop if only decently looked after—not he; he got off the dog-

cart and began kicking about the soil where it was exposed, and then he wandered straight across the field, kicking up the earth and examining it here and there as I never saw done in my life. 'Good Lord!' said he, 'is there much more soil like this in the neighbourhood?' 'You mustn't judge the whole farm by its worst bit, sir,' said I. 'No fear,' said he, with a queer laugh. 'If you have anything as bad as this just carry me to it. How far does that grey seam go on the other side of the ditch?' 'It doesn't go over more than the half of the next field, sir,' said I, 'and it's the Gospel truth I'm telling you when I say that when you've seen that grey seam, you've seen the very worst of the land.' 'Have I?' said he, and he gave another laugh. 'Any way,' said he, 'I've seen enough to do me.' Well, you'll hardly believe it, Mr. Chris, sir, but that man barely looked at Fallow Dip and the other parts that aren't nigh as bad, and so he left us."

"That was a queer sort of survey, Jekyll," said Chris, and he felt that it was indeed a very queer sort of survey. "And then Mr. Mellor came down himself?"

"I never looked to see him, sir," said the bailiff. "I thought that the report of the grey seam would do for us to all time. But there he came with a second surveyor, and they never left the grey seam the full hour they were here—not another field would they look at; and they wanted to hear

nothing about the new farm building, or the engine, or the double action root cutter—there they stood, and there they stood the next day, and there Mr. Mellor stood this morning with the gentleman that he called Mr. Jevons—digging into the earth with a spade they asked me for ; and his Mr. Jevons took away a good quart of it in a tin case in a black bag that he carried.”

“That was certainly a queer way of inspecting a farm of two thousand acres,” said Chris.

“What did they carry off the sample of the soil for, do you think, Mr. Chris ?” asked the man.

“I fancy that they are going to test it with different sorts of manures,” said Chris. “Mr. Mellor has clearly made up his mind to work the farm on the most scientific principles. I have heard of Mr. Jevons : he is a geologist—a gentleman who is a great authority on all kinds of soil. He will probably analyse the sample he carried away and tell Mr. Mellor what is the element it contains that prevents it from growing anything. When they know so much, they will be able to say in a moment how it should be treated so as to make it the most fertile part of the farm.”

“That may be,” said the man ; “but surely the buildings and the plant were worth giving five minutes to ?”

“You and I would think so, at any rate, Jekyll,” said Chris. “But if these gentlemen fancy they know their business better than we do, what can we say ?”

He returned to the Rectory feeling that he was on the track of the discovery of Mr. Mellor's reasons for wishing to get Drellincourt Farm.

He knew now that the man whom he had seen at the wayside station with Mellor was Mr. Jevons, the geologist and prospector, and he also knew that a prospector is a man who obtains the material for a prospectus.

But how would Mr. Mellor, the most adroit prospectus-maker of the age, adapt Drellincourt Farm to the requirements of such a document? Did he mean to "salt" it with gold nuggets? Or was the soil ferruginous? Chris knew that almost anything is good enough as bait for the confiding widows and elderly spinsters who read prospectuses; still, he was well aware of the fact that the farther away from the place of issue of the prospectus is the gold mine to which it refers, the better chance it has of being a success when placed on the market. A gold mine or an iron ore field close at hand does not resemble the bird which is worth two in the bush in the eyes of the gentlemen who wish to make money by "floating" it. A mine in the bush—the Australian bush by preference—is worth half a dozen at hand for "floating" purposes.

Chris knew that Mellor was too astute to make any attempt to ask the public to believe that Drellincourt Farm was in any sense a gold mine. But he was equally certain that it was his hope to convince the public that it was something quite as profitable.

But what was it exactly that he meant the public to believe in regard to Drellincourt Farm?

Chris kept thinking over this question during the hour and a half which he spent in church the next day; but his father reached the last paragraph of his sermon without being of any appreciable help to him in its solution. (The Rector always pulled himself together for a supreme effort whenever his son was among his hearers.)

He returned to town on Sunday afternoon and went to the office of *Morning's Wing* as usual. But he had scarcely glanced at the proof sheets of the war when Mr. Meadows came to his room with some inquiry as to the advisability of publishing a letter which was obviously an attempt on the part of a lady to advertise herself in connection with an entertainment, ostensibly for the relief of certain sufferers, which contained at the same time some grain of news that might be considered interesting.

He was in the act of leaving the room when he suddenly paused.

"By the way," he said, "talking of women and—and the war, I came upon your friend—your friend's daughter, I should rather say—Miss Selwood, a few days ago. You will be glad to hear that she is making a great success of the room—an extraordinary success. You did not tell me much about her; so that I was a little surprised to find myself face to face with such a young woman—such young women—she had brought her sister with

her to keep her company. More charming girls I have never met, Foxcroft. Who is their father? I did not like to ask them if he was alive. It is usually orphans who have to work for a living."

"Their father is Colonel Selwood," said Chris.

"Of Firebrace's Staff? But he is a Selwood of Selwood."

"That is the man. They are his daughters. Selwood is a ruinous place to keep up, even if it were not mortgaged for a good deal more than it is worth. And then Colonel Selwood got the idea that he was the man to make money by floating companies."

"I thought I recollected seeing his name on a notorious prospectus or two. Good heavens! That is how the daughters have to work for their living. They are brave girls."

"Brave—well, I know exactly how brave, for one of them some years ago promised to marry me."

There was an extraordinary pause—an illuminating pause it was to Chris—before Mr. Meadows said in a low voice, and with his eyes fixed on a page of manuscript that he held,

"Which of them?"

"The elder—Muriel—the artist," replied Chris.

He distinctly heard a little gasp of relief which Meadows stifled before saying,

"My dear Foxcroft, let me congratulate you. The most charming girl I ever met—absolutely the most charming!"

"Thank you, Mr. Meadows. I know that I am the most lucky chap alive," said Chris.

"You are—the most lucky chap alive; except perhaps—— Has her sister also promised to marry some one?"

"Joan is still free—Joan is her name."

"That is rather strange. I should have thought that there were men enough left with eyes——"

"There are plenty of men with eyes, but there is Joan Selwood—a girl who is not to be bracketed with the usual girls who are seen by the men with the eyes. She has had at least two lovers a year since she was twenty; but she, too, has eyes, and brains, which are denied to some men with eyes, and a heart which is denied to some women with brains."

"And she is—is she actually a cook, Foxcroft?"

"She is undoubtedly a cook."

"Such bravery! And yet people talk about the Nineteenth-Century girl . . . I was charmed with her. She has not come with her sister since . . . I am afraid that I—that she did not quite understand . . . I should be sorry if I failed to make her understand that. . . ."

"Her birthday will be on Tuesday, and I have promised a treat to her and her sister. They are dining with me at Cipriani's—their aunt, Lady Humber, is coming also, of course—and then we are to go to the Hippodrome. I think that as I am associating with the celebration of her birthday my elevation to this chair, you would be quite

in the picture if you were to join our party, Mr. Meadows. I am sure that both Muriel and Joan would appreciate the compliment which you would be paying us."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure. That was the very thing I was about to beg of you, Foxcroft. The fact is that our meeting had something of a constraint about it. It was too unconventional to be appreciated all at once. It was—well, not quite impudent but on the verge of impudence, on my part to enter the room and begin talking as if I had met them before; but you can understand that I did not realise. . . . You must remember that you did not say a word respecting Miss Selwood's family. I had a notion that the artist of whom you spoke was a middle-aged woman—perhaps the orphan of the man who let you into your rooms—something like that—people do get notions of things without any reason."

Chris laughed.

"Of course you can understand now that I was afraid of saying anything to prejudice you in her favour, Mr. Meadows," he said. "I want to keep friendship and business apart in this matter."

"Of course; I understand," said the proprietor. "Anyhow, all's well that ends—at Cipriani's on Tuesday—at seven—or half-past? We must be early if we are to go to the Hippodrome afterwards."

"Half-past seven will be time enough, I think," said Chris.

CHAPTER XXVII

CHRIS had no difficulty in perceiving that Joan interested Mr. Meadows quite as greatly as Mr. Meadows had interested her. He was a little frightened after Joan had told him of her meeting with Mr. Meadows ; never before in his experience had she spoken so much about any particular man ; and what he was frightened about was lest this particular man might be less inclined to think about her than she was to talk about him. He felt that if Joan were to be less happy in her life after meeting this particular man than she had been before, he, Chris, would never forgive himself for having mentioned Muriel's name—he had not, by the way, mentioned her name—to Mr. Meadows.

But now Mr. Meadows had been with him and had made him understand, without meaning probably to be so definite, that he was so greatly interested in Joan that he found it necessary to stifle a little gasp of relief when he heard that she was still free—that she had not given her promise to marry some man.

Chris felt relieved to hear that little gasp of relief, for that, taken in connection with the rather long

pause which Mr. Meadows had made before asking his question regarding Joan, went a long way toward convincing him that Mr. Meadows had been surprised out of his theory—whatever his theory was—respecting women, when he had met and talked with Joan Selwood.

He looked forward to the Tuesday evening, when the *convenances* would be fully acknowledged, and Mr. Meadows and Joan might talk together, without restraint—if they so wished—and without the uneasy feeling that they must have had upon the occasion of their informal encounter.

He knew that, if any man were to hear the sound of a fine soprano coming from his own drawing-room and were then to find that the artist whom he had employed to do some painting in his room, had introduced a sister to the house, there would of necessity be a certain amount of restraint in the meeting of the sister and the owner of the house. And he was also of the opinion that this restraint would be all the greater if the owner of the house were such a man as Mr. Meadows, and the sister of the artist such a girl as Joan Selwood.

Still, in spite of all this, it was plain that Mr. Meadows and Joan had not felt the situation to be so embarrassing as to preclude the possibility of either of them being able to take a certain amount of interest in the other.

Chris had none of the instincts of a match-maker, but he could not avoid thinking that if this mutual

interest were to broaden—or was narrow the word?—into something stronger than the mere sensation of interest—something more than this mere surface tickling of interest, the fact of his having suggested to Mr. Meadows the idea of getting his drawing-room beautified by Muriel Selwood, might be regarded as a singularly happy thing.

He looked forward to Tuesday evening all the time that he wrote a neat little piece of scathment respecting the rejection by the War Office of certain 25-horse-power dynamos, the presence of which would have rendered the gunners in South Africa quite independent of horses, and have enabled them, by the simple attachment of a couple of wires, to get the heaviest guns up to the highest kopjes without either risk or exertion.

Then he wrote a letter to the publisher who was about to issue the book which had been pronounced too startling the year before, regarding the very important matter of review copies; and then he waited to see the first pages of the newly printed paper, before strolling to his rooms, trying to solve that question which he had put to himself in church: "What was it exactly that Mellor wished the public to believe regarding Drellincourt Farm?"

He went asleep without having any answer to that question suggested to him.

When he got a letter in the morning from Mr. Vickers, inquiring if he had yet had an opportunity of speaking to "the young ladies" on the subject

of Mr. Mellor's offer, and mentioning incidentally that Mr. Mellor had written to him, suggesting that quite an unnecessary time had been spent over what Mr. Mellor termed "shilly-shallying," and hinting that the offer which he had made for the farm was liable to be withdrawn at the end of the week, Chris Foxcroft knew that Mr. Mellor was very anxious to get the title-deeds into his possession. He knew that that subtle element known as "bluff" was commonly regarded by men of his stamp as a potent auxiliary to the realisation of their plans; so he merely sat down and wrote a letter to Mr. Vickers, assuring him that he fully appreciated Mr. Mellor's contention, and hoping that he, Chris, might be in a position to advise Colonel Selwood's daughters by the end of the week on the subject of Mr. Mellor's offer. He further begged leave to assure Mr. Vickers that he appreciated his suggestion that such an offer as Mr. Mellor's would, in all probability, never be made again.

After a considerable amount of thought, he wrote another letter, and this one he addressed to Professor Seyder, Royal College of Science, South Kensington, reminding him that he had not yet kept his promise to pay a Saturday to Monday visit with him to the Rectory at Husbandman's Selwood, and asking him if he could make it convenient to accompany him thither on the following Saturday, mentioning by way of an allurements, the great charm which competent

judges admitted was to be found in certain aspects of an English Spring in the country.

Professor Seyder was an old friend of his; and he had an idea, which was shared by most people who were intimately acquainted with Professor Seyder, that Professor Seyder knew more of the practical aspects of science in every form than did any living man. He felt convinced that, not only would this well-informed man be greatly benefited by his excursion to the country, and improved—but this was not so certain—by the sermon which he would hear preached by the rector, but he would also be able to give some sound advice as to the geology of Drellincourt Farm.

The next morning he got a reply from his friend. It was not voluminous.

“Capital idea. But how did you know it was Spring? Will the 11.42 suit you?”

That was the letter in full. Professor Seyder had apparently mastered the science of economy of language with the rest of the sciences.

Chris felt that he had made some progress toward the solution of the question which was perplexing him. He could not avoid a certain impression of uneasiness in regard to this matter of the farm; it was so unlike any other transaction in which he had ever been concerned. He cordially agreed with Mr. Vickers that such an offer as Mr. Mellor's was not likely to come from any one else, and it was just possible that Mr. Vickers had taken the right view of

Mellor's ambition to become possessor of a farm which every one had pronounced incapable of growing anything, and that, after all, he was actually impatient at being kept so long without a definite reply to his proposal to purchase the property.

The responsibility which rested on Chris in this business, he felt to be a very serious one. He might be the means of depriving the Selwood family of a sum of money sufficiently great to pay off a mortgage which represented a charge of quite twelve hundred pounds a year upon the estate, and the saving of this sum might really mean the saving of Selwood to the family.

All that he had to reassure him in regard to the attitude which he had taken up, was his knowledge of character—his knowledge of men. He fancied that he had formed a right estimate of the character of Mellor, and he was quite unable to reconcile the liberality of his offer for Drellincourt Farm with his meanness—no stronger word was in his mind—in regard to the Rockingham Bank shares.

And then there was, of course, the extraordinary behaviour of the man and his surveyor and his prospector at the farm. They had gone down to estimate the value of the farm, and yet they had not thought it worth while to examine the buildings on the property or the machinery—they had even disregarded the claims of the double-action root cutter and the 12-horse-power engine.

Chris felt that he was acting up to his lights, and

in accordance with his knowledge of men ; but all the same he longed for Saturday.

But before Saturday arrived, Tuesday came, and on the evening of that day his little dinner-party took place at Cipriani's. Of course he did not present Muriel or her sister to Mr. Meadows, though Lady Humber was quite definite in her view that the etiquette of the situation necessitated his doing so. Lady Humber was quite an authority on etiquette. She also knew more than any living person regarding the Language of Flowers. To the suggestions of the fan and the speech of the handkerchief, she had devoted a good deal of attention from time to time.

"I assure you, Mr. Foxcroft," she said, "it is right that, as the relation between Mr. Meadows and my nieces has been a purely business one hitherto, it will be necessary for you to introduce him personally to them."

"If there is any doubt on the matter," said Joan, "I will write to Aunt Angela in the *Lady's Weekly Mirror*, and she will give us an answer in her column of information. This will be her reply: 'Pansy'—I will call myself Pansy, of course. 'Pansy.—Undoubtedly, my dear Pansy ; if you are a house painter, and have been employed by a gentleman to work for him, you must be formally introduced to him if you meet again in Society. I must say, dear Pansy, that it is not *de rigueur* for house painters to

bring their sisters to sing in the empty rooms where they are employed, and the fact that you did so by no means obviates the necessity for your dear sister to be also introduced to the gentleman should she meet him out. Dear Pansy, young ladies, especially those in the house-painting line, cannot be too careful. Your handwriting suggests impetuosity, and your indifferent spelling, carelessness. But these characteristics should be curbed. I hope you use Carter's Crimpers for frizzly fringes. (See Advt. p. 6).' That will be the reply."

"I cannot put off my dinner for a month until you get it," said Chris. "I will take Lady Humber's word for the etiquette of the situation."

But all the same, he had only to present Lady Humber to Mr. Meadows. Mr. Meadows greeted both the girls before Lady Humber's measured smile had dwindled into the distance of the dining-room.

But in spite of the start being made on no sound basis of drawing-room procedure, the dinner was a complete success, as was also the performance at the Hippodrome which they negligently omitted witnessing. The fact was, that the little party found so much to talk about both at dinner and when the Turkish coffee was made—Turkish coffee is made, not brought—they took no note of the passing of time, and it was only Lady Humber's thoughtfulness that made the others aware of the lateness of the hour. It was Joan who suggested that the *amour propre* of the lions might be offended by the

appearance of visitors who had neglected them all the evening—Joan always was considerate in regard to animals—and she had no difficulty in persuading Muriel and Chris as to the humanitarianism of her judgment in this matter. Lady Humber was bought over by the promise of a future treat by Chris.

It was also Joan who was induced by Mr. Meadows—by a curious fatality, carefully arranged beforehand by Chris, Mr. Meadows was placed between Muriel and Joan at the table—to give a professional criticism of the dinner, beginning at the *hors d'œuvres* and proceeding in detail down to the Turkish coffee; and then her criticism was criticised by Mr. Meadows with a liveliness which Chris had never suspected to be part of his nature. Muriel was then persuaded by Chris to deal with the *mise-en-scène* of the table and with the chromatic arrangement of the courses, and Chris himself wound up the discussion by looking at the entertainment from the standpoint of the man in the street.

There was a good deal of merriment in half-tones at that little round table in Cipriani's, and, beyond doubt, some of it overflowed into the neat article which Chris wrote afterwards on the subject of the Continental Press references to the automatic advance of the British Empire, and the necessity to oppose it in time. The Continental critics resembled, he said, a party of censors who had made up their minds that the lions at the Hippodrome should have

their claws cut, and after passing a resolution to this effect, had dined unostentatiously at Cipriani's and then gone home to their beds. The Continental critics, he suggested, were still in their restaurants ; and the British lion, meantime, was very profitably employed keeping his claws in a serviceable condition in South Africa—the natural habitat of that particular specimen of the order Leones.

The little article was widely quoted in the evening papers the next day, and some people remembered it even to the end of the week—so that it was a sort of Methuselah among sub-leaders.

Chris took tea with the two girls a few days later, carrying with him his new novel, which was published that day, and in which he had written Muriel's name. He was anxious to know what impression had been produced upon Joan by her further acquaintance with Mr. Meadows, and he learned even more than he hoped to learn, from her adroitness in evading any discussion of Mr. Meadows and his manners. She was as reticent now as she had been frank previously, on the subject of Mr. Meadows. She was extremely guarded in the terms of her acquiescence in Chris's remarks in respect of Mr. Meadows' brilliance in conversation, as well as his tact—the two were not invariably found associated, he could assure her—and when he asked her if she had not remarked a certain originality in his way of looking at everyday things, she had merely given a pretty little imitation of the uncompromising shrug

of Madame Réjane in a play of Sardou's, in which the intellectual elements alternate between the shrug and the snarl.

In short, Joan evaded with that sort of tact which is another name for femininity, every attempt he made—also with tact—to find out if she still thought Mr. Meadows the pleasantest man whom she had ever met; and thus she told him much more than he could possibly have learned from her frankness. He also acquired a kind of postscript piece of information by her sudden recollection that she had promised Lady Humber's humble cook to do something for her with a basket of mushrooms—a duty which, unlike most duties, was not susceptible of improvement by systematic procrastination.

He looked at Muriel, after he had made a snatch for her hand, when Joan had disappeared with a p.p.c. smile.

"Poor little Joan!" he said with a man's laugh. "How funny it was that she should go with you that day to Mr. Meadows' house! How funny that the piano should be the only article of furniture in the rooms! How funny that she should be led on to sing! And how—how Providential that Mr. Meadows returned by the night boat from Brussels!"

Muriel said that she liked the design on the cover of his book very much. And indeed it was very mysterious.

He left the house after a reasonable space, feeling

that the philosopher who had reckoned up the relative values of speech and reticence, was not very far astray in his assessment.

He called at his club and found Mr. Meadows there. Mr. Meadows congratulated him on the cleverness of his new novel. He would be very much mistaken, he said, if the book did not make a stir, the characters were so brilliantly unsympathetic. They were human beings, however, and readers were always ready to sympathise with human beings no matter how unsympathetic they were. The deep pathos of the unsympathetic had never had justice done to it, in Mr. Meadows' opinion, and he wondered if he might venture to ask Lady Humber and her nieces to come to his box at the Hyperion on Monday, and to take supper with him at his house afterwards—of course Chris would come.

But Chris said he must be at the newspaper office between nine and eleven on Monday, so that he could not join the party at the theatre ; but it would please him greatly to look in at South Audley Street in time for the supper.

Mr. Meadows said he would write to Lady Humber, and Chris felt convinced that he would keep his promise.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEFORE the departure of the 11.42 train for Husbandman's Selwood on Saturday, Christopher Wakefield Foxcroft, the author of "Owls and Cherubs"—he was always fond of Shakesperian titles: they were so obscure—found out that his new novel had caught the public fancy, though of course a few days must still pass, his publisher told him, before he could say if the demand for the book would continue. It was plain, however, that if the demand were suddenly to come to an end, the blame for such a contretemps would not have to be attributed to its treatment by the critics; for they were for the most part extremely prompt in their reviews, and there was not a review that did not stimulate the curiosity of practical book buyers.

Some abused the author for not having made all his characters sympathetic; and the public knew from this that there was no lame child in the book, and rejoiced accordingly.

Others said that the book was full of epigrams, but that epigrams never yet made a book a permanent success; and the public knew by this that the book was full of epigrams, and bought it.

But no class of reviewer was so hard on it as to call it an epoch-making book ; and the author was glad, for he had had a sufficient experience of the dulness of epoch-making books to cause him to hope that he would never be accused of producing one of them.

The epoch-making books which were in his mind, had, after making their epoch, quietly died ; so the grub, after weaving its cocoon about itself, has no further part in the life of the world around it. Some epoch-making grubs of Grub Street after one such achievement, usually disappear from view.

Chris found his reviews encouraging ; but it was only when his friend Professor Seyder, who met him at 11.41 at Victoria Station, gave him his hand, saying, " I have read 'Owls and Cherubs.' It is an admirable book," that he realised that he had scored a success.

It so happened that Professor Seyder, in addition to knowing more than any living man on all scientific subjects known to men, knew a good deal more of novels—French and English—than any living woman ; and upon several occasions he had won a reputation for literary acumen for *Morning's Wing* by prophesying a success for certain books which Chris had sent to him for review and which had certainly become notable successes. The reviewer who can "spot a winner" in fiction is, of course, never regarded with the same interest as is the sporting editor who does the same in regard to a

race, but still he commands a certain amount of respect within a limited circle; and Chris had ample confidence in his friend's judgment, even though he did praise "Owls and Cherubs."

And it turned out that what Chris had said about spring being in the country was perfectly true. The train ran through bright green hedgerows, and there was some warmth in the air at last. He called his friend's attention to these facts before telling him exactly why he had desired his company in the region of Husbandman's Selwood. He was anxious to convince him that, even if he might be asked to contribute to the solution of the question of the geology of Drellincourt Farm, he would still benefit by a couple of days spent among hedgerows and within sight of lambs that were really white as to their fleec.

He narrated all his experiences and his suspicions to his friend Seyder, and Seyder said,

"The chances are that there is nothing worth talking about in this particular farm—that this fellow Mellor only wants to be thought a little more of a country gentleman: a gentleman farmer—that title has a good old English ring about it. He may want to be alluded to as a typical English Yeoman—the yeoman has come to the front lately."

"He has gone to the front, at any rate, and that's something," said Chris. "Then you think that Mellor's vanity is at the bottom of the whole business—that he gave his surveyor instructions to avoid so

much as glancing at the farm buildings—that he brought Jevons down to the place and sent him back with a bagful of the soil solely to gratify his vanity?”

“There is nothing so useful to a really practical man as imagination,” said Professor Seyder. “That is why I do my best to encourage my students to read all the novels they can lay their hands on. The most practical men that the world has ever known have been dreamers.”

“You think that Mellor is dreaming of being thought the ideal English country gentleman?”

“I mean that your imaginative mind will cause you to be more than a match for Mellor, with all his business cleverness, if he has really hit upon a good thing in this farm. You wisely disregard the whisper of science that the chance of his having hit upon a good thing in this farm are about ten thousand to one.”

“Situated as I am, I cannot afford to neglect even that one chance out of the ten thousand,” said Chris. “Man, just think what I should suffer if it turned out that—that — Well, coal, I suppose, is out of the question. Is iron equally out of the question?”

“Only a trifle more so,” said Seyder. “Never mind, you have acted in accordance with the dictates of your imagination, and no one who does that can be far wrong.”

In the afternoon Chris and his friend trudged through the bright green lanes made musical by the blackbird and the thrush, across bright green meadows

under blue skies made musical with the lark, to Drellincourt Farm.

"Neither coal nor iron," said the man of science when they had walked across a few of the fields. "Nothing but the usual poor soil of an exhausted farm. But I'll go over the whole thousand acres to satisfy you—and myself. I am on the side of the angels, for angels are the product of the imagination."

Chris was dumb. There was something of a droop about his head. He was wondering if he should walk on to Drellincourt Station, to send the telegram to Mr. Vickers asking him to call upon the Miss Selwoods, and state that he, Chris, was strongly in favour of accepting Mr. Mellor's terms, when his companion stopped with the suddenness of a dog that runs its nose up against a dead wall of scent, so to speak.

He had reached the grey seam which had arrested the attention of Mr. Mellor's first surveyor.

"What's the matter?" asked Chris. "What are you looking at there?"

There was a long interval before the man of science spoke. He stooped down and lifted a handful of the soil and allowed it to run through his fingers. Then he laughed loud and long.

"How much did Mellor offer for the farm?" he asked at last.

"Twenty-five thousand pounds," replied Chris. "Do you mean to say that my surmise——"

"And this seam crosses three fields and then

spreads out like a fan—I can trace it across that rising ground—half a mile of it! Foxcroft, the man of imagination is worth a millionaire without it. We are standing beside the richest vein of Pyrotid in England.”

“Pyrotid—I have heard the name, but at this moment I forget in what connection,” faltered Chris.

“Surely even a newspaper man has heard of Pyrotid. Pyrotid is one of the most recent discoveries of one of our youngest geologists. It is the sand which has solved the problem of the wood pavement. Applied to the blocks, it not only preserves the wood from decay, it gives the surface a roughness which increases in damp—just when it is most needed—and it sells for something like four pounds a ton. It was thought that there was only one seam of it in England.”

“And how many tons of it are about us?”

“Probably a hundred and fifty thousand—possibly a million. We are standing on the richest soil in England at the present moment, and the man of imagination has brought the price of Pyrotid down with a rush from four pounds a ton to three pounds ten shillings.”

“I should like to kick Mellor over every acre of the farm,” said Chris simply.

And that was the aspiration which remained uppermost with him for several hours.

It remained with him all the time that he continued walking with his friend over the barren place of untold riches, and his friend made him acquainted

with the incident of the discovery of the remarkable properties of the soil which had prevented the satisfactory cultivation of any form of cereal upon it.

But before he had returned to the Rectory, the impulse to commit an assault upon the person of Mr. Mellor had given place to a great longing to get by the side of those two girls who had faced the ruin of their house so bravely, and had shown no intention of resigning themselves to the disaster which had come upon them. They had boldly thrown down the gauntlet to Fate, and they had conquered in the first encounter in the campaign. The detestable virtue of resignation was not their inheritance, and it now seemed as if Fate had applied to him for quarter. He felt that he would like to take the first train to London, to have the joy of telling them that their house was safe—that they had saved it by their forethought.

He believed in his own capacity to prove to Muriel, at any rate, that it was her forethought, in perceiving that the man whom she had promised to marry was the man to trust, in spite of the fact that no daughter of her house had ever promised to marry a man in so humble a position in life as that which he occupied, that had averted the disaster and brought prosperity to Selwood. Of course it was plain that, if she had agreed to marry one of the men who had asked her—two of them were the heads of important county families, and the third was even a more distinguished person: he had recently turned his

brewery into a company and had, out of the generosity of his heart, far over-capitalised it—Drellincourt Farm would have been sold to Mellor for twenty-five thousand pounds.

But whether or not Muriel could be brought to look upon herself as the one who had been far-seeing enough to save the house of Selwood, he would have the satisfaction of seeing her confront the impending prosperity ; and though he was not sure if she would face it with the same resolution as she had shown in regard to the impending disaster, he was certain that it would be the greatest joy of his life to be the bearer of the tidings to her.

Before his father's excellent sermon had come to a legitimate conclusion the next day—people said it was so nice to see that the wickedness of London had left no impression upon the Rector's son, for this was the second Sunday in succession on which he had come down to hear his father preach—Chris had come to perceive that it would not do for him to be precipitate in this matter. He would only be acting wisely were he to obtain further advice respecting the value of Pyrotid on his return to town, before going with the good news to the daughters of Selwood.

He returned to town with his friend on Sunday evening, and drove at once to the office of *Morning's Wing*, where he learned that a gentleman had called to see him a quarter of an hour before. He had left his card with a message written on it.

He opened the envelope in which the card was enclosed, and then he lay back in his chair and laughed as he had never laughed before; for he read on the card the name of Mr. Mellor, and on the reverse the words, "Will return to see Mr. Foxcroft at 11 p.m."

Chris laughed, and gave instructions for the reception of the man.

He arrived at 11.5.

He had begun to speak before he had quite entered the room, ignoring Chris's well-simulated obsequiousness in finding him a chair—he was accustomed to such obsequiousness: it was his privilege to ignore it.

"Vickers tells me that my friend Selwood has appointed you a sort of trustee for his estate, and that you and his daughters have the power to decide all matters connected with it," said Mr. Mellor—and he had said so much before he removed his hat. "Well, I want to have an answer about that farm to-night," he continued without a pause. "I'm not accustomed, let me tell you, to this shilly-shally, sir. If you don't want to sell the farm, just tell me so. There is no particular scarcity of farms to be sold in England just now."

Then he stopped.

Chris began to fear that the discussion might collapse at the outset. And he did not want that to happen: he was anxious to study Mr. Mellor for literary purposes.

"I hope you have not been inconvenienced, Mr. Mellor," he said. "But I am sure that, as a business man, you will make some allowance for men like myself."

"I have made allowances enough, my good fellow," said Mr. Mellor through pursed-out lips. "Why should I make any concessions to you, I should like to know?"

"Well, you see, I have never been in a position of so much responsibility before," said Chris; "and I feel that I should do my best for Colonel Selwood. If I were to sanction the sale of the farm at a lower price than its full value, I should never forgive myself."

"Didn't Vickers tell you that I had offered twenty-five thousand for it, eh?" said Mellor. "Didn't he tell you that that was nearly double what any one else would offer for it?"

"Well, I admit that Mr. Vickers thought your offer a handsome one," said Chris. "Still——"

"Still—still what? Do you fancy that you can squeeze another thousand out of me, my good fellow? Do you fancy that you are cleverer than the lawyer to the family, who knows that, after that blessed land had ruined two generations of farmers, Selwood himself took it in hand and dropped twelve thousand over it? You think that because I'm Mellor, you can squeeze me. You—you—squeeze me! Do you, a rational man, think that I'm a good mark for the blackmailer, Mr. Foxcroft?"

Here Mr. Mellor put his hat very firmly on his head, and turned toward the door.

"No, no, Mr. Mellor, I assure you; I should never think that you would submit to any form of blackmail," said Chris.

"Well, it looks very like as if blackmail was in your mind," said Mellor, without taking off his hat. "I don't want Drellincourt Farm particularly; only it's handy, and—well, I admit that I like having a tussle with something that has beaten some other chaps. You've heard of my thoroughbred Roysterer—he killed two grooms and a stable-boy. That's why I bought him. He hasn't killed me yet. He eats lumps of sugar out of my hand."

"Beet or cane-sugar, Mr. Mellor?" asked Chris, in the tone of one intensely interested.

Mr. Mellor did not understand what he meant.

"Beet or cane—beet or——" he muttered.

"You may not be aware, Mr. Mellor," said Chris, "that beet sugar is conducive to gout—or some symptoms of gout, such as eczema. But cane——"

"I didn't come here to talk about sugar, my good fellow," said Mellor. "Well, I suppose I may consider the matter as settled at last. But, mind you, if you don't want to take twenty-five thousand for the farm, just say so at once, and I'll wire my man to secure a big thing next my own place."

"Will you tell me frankly, Mr. Mellor, that you believe you are offering the full value for Drellincourt Farm?" asked Chris, playing with a pen.

"Good Lord, sir!" cried Mellor, without a moment's hesitation, "I give you my sacred word that I'm offering some thousands of pounds—maybe ten thousand—more than the full value of the farm."

"I want to do the best for the family, Mr. Mellor—you see that I do. Can I not persuade you to go somewhat in advance of your offer?" asked Chris

"Look here, sir," said Mellor, leaning toward him, "if you don't wish to sell the farm for the money I have offered, just say so at once. It would please me—it would—I give you my word it would please me to hear you refuse."

"I can hardly resist your appeal, Mr. Mellor. I should be very glad to do something to please you," said Chris. "But you will show some self-denial, I am sure; you will see your way to make some advance upon twenty-five thousand?"

"Not a—— Hang it all! Selwood is a decent chap, and he is fighting for the Empire," cried Mellor. "Hang it all! I'm not the sort of man to haggle over a pound or two in a matter that concerns a Soldier of the Queen. I'll make it guineas, my man."

Chris did not want to see anything more of Mellor. His assumption of the air of a patron in regard to the man whom he was doing his best to rob—whom he had already robbed, though after all it was only business—was enough for Chris, avaricious though he was on all questions of copy for future use.

He shook his head sadly, after he had worked out a sum on a piece of paper, saying,

"I'm afraid that I could not sanction the sale of the farm for twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty pounds, Mr. Mellor."

"Then you may keep it and be hanged to you!" cried Mellor, going to the door. But before he had turned the handle, he looked round. "I want to do something for Selwood," he said; "what is the figure that's in your mind, my good fellow?"

"If you say two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, I'll consider your offer, but without prejudice," said Chris.

Mr. Mellor stared at him for a moment from the door. Then he walked across the room and stood in front of Chris's desk.

"Two hundred and—— Are you mad?—Are you—oh, Jevons is a scoundrel!—Jevons has given me away!" said Mellor in the tone of a man who muses.

"No," said Chris. "You gave yourself away, my good Mr. Melior; and now please take yourself away as quickly as possible. You are a poor sort of person, after all, Mr. Mellor. You are possibly the leading exponent of the cult of swagger and bounce and hustle, but you are a poor sort of person all the same. Now, be off with you."

Then Mr. Mellor showed himself to be a greater fool even than Chris took him to be; for he glanced at the door, and then leant over the desk, saying,

"Mr. Foxcroft, you are the cleverest man I have met in all my life. I'm sure you are clever enough to look at this business from a strictly business

standpoint. You don't want to spend the rest of your life writing for a measly newspaper. Sixty thousand pounds in your hand to-day would give you, at four per cent.—"

His voice had sunk to a whisper. In a whisper Chris interrupted him.

"H'sh, for Heaven's sake!" he said. "Do you suggest that I should stand in with you in this transaction?"

"Sixty thousand pounds—I'll give you my cheque on the spot—before I get the title-deeds. If we float Drellincourt Farm—that is the only condition. Sixty thousand! You need never see an ink-bottle again. You'll stand in with us?"

Then Chris got up from his chair and walked stealthily to the door, which he opened very gently. He looked up and down the passage on to the stone stairs at the further end. Then he returned to the room. All his old impulse to kick Mr. Mellor came back to him, but he resisted that impulse manfully. All that he did was to leave the door open and point to it, as if he feared that Mr. Mellor might not know his way from the desk to the door.

"Look here," said Mr. Mellor, "you're no fool. I'll say seventy thousand."

Still Chris managed to crush down his kicking impulse. He merely made a rush at Mr. Mellor, and knocked his hat off into the passage, and then gave it a kick that sent it down the stone staircase.

Mr. Mellor was not the man to take so gross an

insult without an attempt at retaliation—meekness was not one of his attributes. He had followed his hat in a hurry for a few steps along the corridor, but so soon as his hat had cleared the edge of the staircase he saw the futility of trying to prevent a disaster to it. Then he turned with clenched hands and livid face to Chris.

“You—you—you young—— Sir, you’re no gentleman!” cried Mr. Mellor, while he retreated.

Chris heard him descend the stairs, and when he got to the first lobby, explain to the member of the staff who had picked up the hat, that he had unfortunately hit it against the wire netting of the gas-bracket.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN spite of the opinion given by Professor Seyder as to the properties to be found in the soil of a great portion of Drellincourt Farm—in spite also of the fact that Mr. Mellor had admitted, in his own way, that his views as to the value of the farm agreed (approximately) with those held by Professor Seyder, Chris Foxcroft felt that he could not be over-cautious in this particular matter. He had proved to his own satisfaction that he was strong enough to control his impulses in regard to Mr. Mellor, and he had confidence that he would be able to control his longing to go to Muriel and Joan in order to tell them that the House of Selwood had been saved from disaster.

What a terrible thing it would be if he were to go to them with his story and afterwards find out that Drellincourt Farm was, after all, no more valuable than the head-bailiff believed it to be! To be sure, Mellor had founded his opinion on the judgment of his two surveyors and Mr. Jevons—the last-named being one of the greatest authorities in England—while he himself had got the opinion of an eminent man of science.

Still he was not entirely satisfied. He had brought

up to town with him a bottleful of the grey vein, and fortified by a letter from Professor Seyder, he went boldly with it to the laboratory of the man who had discovered the properties of Pyrotid. He was unfortunate enough not to find the man at his laboratory at the School of Science; but leaving his letter of introduction and a card, hoping that he might be able to see him in an hour, he took the train to the Temple, and sought Mr. Vickers in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

He was fortunate enough to find him in his room, to which he was admitted after a word or two with the clerk who never had told a lie.

Mr. Vickers was frigid.

"I have just received a letter from Mr. Mellor in which he formally withdraws his offer, Mr. Foxcroft," said he.

Chris smiled, saying: "Oh, really! Does he give any reason for this shilly-shally?"

Mr. Vickers stared at the speaker pretty much as old Mr. Hardcastle must have stared at young Marlow when the latter said he would like to glance at the menu of supper.

"Brazen-faced impudence!" was the translation of the stare, and Chris knew it.

He was silly enough to long for a victory over Mr. Vickers of the type of that which he had won over Mr. Mellor.

"Mr. Foxcroft, I must say that it is by your shilly-shallying—your unaccountable shilly-shallying—the

sale of this farm at a price far over its market value has been lost—lost to the family whose interests you profess to have at heart,” said Mr. Vickers.

“Perhaps another purchaser may be found for it, Mr. Vickers,” said he with the air of a penitent. “The fact is that I felt sure that Mellor’s threat to withdraw his offer was only bluff.”

“Only bluff—only—— Mr. Foxcroft, I feared from the outset that you did not understand business. I hope that, in these circumstances, you will not think it necessary to interfere, should another opportunity occur of disposing of the farm.”

“I am sorry that I can give no such promise to you, Mr. Vickers. Have you had any other offers for the farm?”

“To my amazement—but it is only a remarkable coincidence, nothing is likely to come of it—I have received three inquiries regarding it this morning,” said Mr. Vickers. “But I really must beg of you, Mr. Foxcroft, to allow me to——”

“Three inquiries—three?” said Chris musingly. Here was a development which he had not foreseen. Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him. “Good heavens!” he cried, “they have all given him away—all Mellor’s satellites have given him away! Two of the applications come from Mellor’s surveyors and the third from Jevons—is not that so, Mr. Vickers?”

“Undoubtedly two of the letters come from firms of land surveyors who have clients ready to treat for the farm,” replied Mr. Vickers.

"And the third?"

"Yes, I believe the name is Jevons. But do not go away with the idea that any one of them will offer the price Mr. Mellor suggested, Mr. Foxcroft."

"My dear Mr. Vickers, there is not one of them who would not be glad to multiply Mr. Mellor's offer by ten. I could have sold the farm to Mellor, when he called on me last night, for a hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

Mr. Vickers stared again, and then glanced toward the fender. He plainly wished to see that the poker was within easy reach.

"Mr. Vickers, have you heard of Pyrotid?" inquired Chris confidentially.

"Sir," said Mr. Vickers with dignity, "I am not a betting man."

"It is not the name of a horse, but of a singular mineral," said Chris. "It is worth four pounds a ton, and there are two hundred thousand tons of it on Drellincourt Farm. I found that out by the aid of a little shilly-shallying; but I admit that I got my cue regarding its existence from Mellor, for, Mr. Vickers, in the profession to which I belong it is absolutely necessary for one to understand men."

"I must ask you to be explicit, Mr. Foxcroft," said the solicitor, with only a shade of nervousness in his tone.

"I owe you an apology," said Chris. "Yes, I will be explicit."

And he was explicit.

So was the discoverer of the properties of Pyrotid when Chris waited on him at the hour he had suggested. The contents of the bottle which Chris had left with him contained, as he proved by a simple experiment that completely baffled Chris to follow, a large percentage of pure Pyrotid, and if any one had five thousand tons of it, Colonel Waters, the head of the Wood Paving Syndicate, would buy it at the rate of four pounds one shilling and ninepence a ton, at the pit's mouth.

His last doubt vanished into the odour of pot pourri—perhaps, after all, it was not really pot pourri—that pervaded the laboratory.

He called a hansom—he felt that he might indulge in the luxurious peril of a hansom upon this occasion—and drove to Lady Humber's house; it was close upon five o'clock, so that he knew he had a very good chance of finding Muriel and her sister at tea.

He ran upstairs to the miniature drawing-room, and found Muriel alone there. She was darning a rent in her painting-blouse.

Chris stood opposite the garment that bore the honourable stains of her work, and he looked at the beautiful girl—the daughter of the historic house, who had promised to love him—and then he did a queer thing; for he fell into the nearest chair, and putting his hands before his face, he wept as he had not wept for over twenty years. He had made

a vainglorious boast in the presence of Mr. Vickers of his knowledge of men ; but he knew nothing of his own heart and its workings.

She was kneeling at his side in a moment, putting an arm about him.

"What is the matter, dearest Chris?" she whispered. "Tell me the worst. It cannot be bad, dear ; are we not together?"

"It is not the worst—it is the best," he cried. "It is the best news that I bring ; and yet—oh, it was too pathetic to see you—you—working at that—that—like a sempstress, and all the time Selwood is empty—waiting for you."

She was puzzled.

"You have overworked yourself ; you are nervous. You must come with us to the theatre to-night. Mr. Meadows will insist on it when he sees in what condition you are. Here comes Joan. She will persuade you."

"Am I to come in?" said Joan. "Don't have me if you have something to talk about."

"Come in, Joan ; old Chris has brought us some good news, and——"

"Oh, Chris ! he has been made a general ; papa has been appointed to a brigade," cried Joan.

Chris mopped away his tears. He sprang from his chair and walked to the window and looked out. The girls stood silent in the middle of the room. A maid entered with a tray and teacups. She saw Miss Selwood's young man—that was naturally how

he was referred to in the ancillary department—with his back turned to the young ladies.

"A tiff!" thought the maid, as she left the silent room.

In a minute or two he had pulled himself together. He went to the girls with a hand outstretched to each. He kissed each of them.

"I am a bit of a fool," he said, as though he were generalising on the act—as though he were saying, "Any man who kisses two girls at once is a bit of a fool."

"You are overstrung, dear old Chris; we know that your novel is a great success—every one says so," cried Joan soothingly, as one who is wise soothes one who is a fool.

"You will be better when you have had a cup of tea," said Muriel.

"It is not the novel—it is Selwood!" said he. "Selwood is safe. Selwood is waiting for you. Your money troubles are at an end. Every penny of the mortgages can be paid off, and there will still be thousands left."

"Do take a cup of tea," said Muriel.

"And one of the cream cakes; they are hot this evening, for a wonder," said Joan.

"Yes; it sounds like nonsense, doesn't it? Selwood free—out of pawn; but it is a fact," said Chris. "Of course I'll have a cup of tea and one of the cream cakes. Whether that will convince you of my sanity or insanity, I do not venture to say. No,

on second thoughts, I'll not touch meat or drink—that's the correct wording of the old vow—until I tell you all there is to be told."

It did not take him long to tell the story of the discovery of the Pyrotid; only he tried to make them believe that it was by the merest chance that he had brought his friend Professor Seyder for a walk over Drellincourt Farm. He did not succeed in convincing them on this point. They knew perfectly well that they owed the discovery to him; but they were not the less glad on this account.

They took the news of their good fortune as calmly as they had taken the news of their disaster.

"I'll have to finish the panels in Mr. Meadows' drawing-room," said Muriel seriously; "but I don't think that I shall accept any more orders."

"I should think not," said Joan. "I frankly admit that I hate working for a living. Discipline? I detest discipline."

"But you were not afraid to face it when there was a need—that will be remembered against you, so long as you live," said Chris.

"Oh, it is only a variation of Polonius' advice to his son," cried Joan: "'Beware the entrance to a—a workshop, but being in't—' well, work all you know. Oh, dear Chris, you have saved us—you have saved Selwood!"

"Nonsense!" said he. "Do you mean to suggest that it was I who mixed the Pyrotid with the soil of Drellincourt Farm? Good heavens! I never heard

of Pyrotid before Saturday. What is it that you are thinking of now, my Muriel?"

"I am thinking of South Africa," she said.

And then the two sisters rushed into each other's arms. Chris stole away to the music of their joyful sobbing.

Chris thought it well to tell Mr. Meadows of the piece of good fortune which had befallen the family of Selwood, and Mr. Meadows was very grave in his reception of the news—he could not have been graver if the news had been of a further disaster to the House of Selwood.

Chris, who remembered his own feelings on hearing from Muriel that she and her sister had made up their minds to work for a living, had some idea of what Mr. Meadows thought at that moment. Was it not possible that, just as Chris had felt that Muriel's being compelled to come down from her position at Selwood and join the great family of workers, had brought her closer to him, Meadows might be thinking that the restoration of the fortunes of the great house would come between him and the other daughter of the house?

(He assumed that Meadows was in love with Joan, though he knew that he had only met Joan three times—a fact which his friend Professor Seyder would have gloated over, accepting it as a triumph of the imagination over conventionality.)

"Then my little supper-party after the theatre

comes at an opportune moment," said Mr. Meadows, obviously making an effort to conceal the exact impression which the news had produced upon him.

"It will have the significance of a commemoration banquet," said Chris.

"I trust to you to turn up in good time, Foxcroft," said Mr. Meadows. "I really cannot see why you should not come with us to the Hyperion as well."

"It would be impossible for me to go to the theatre, considering the critical position of affairs just now," said Chris. "But I will not fail you at supper. I will give directions for the proofs of the war news to be sent to me at midnight, so that, in case there is any important development of the situation, I can write something at the last moment."

And that arrangement was carried out. Chris did his work on *Morning's Wing* while his friends were enjoying themselves at the Hyperion, and he was waiting for them at South Audley Street when they arrived there from the theatre.

Joan assured him that they had had a delightful time at the play, though there seemed to be a consensus of opinion among the party that the translation of the play was poor, and that the actors were also artistically indigent. That was just the sort of play to give a party in a box a delightful time in neglecting.

From the high spirits of Joan and the thoughtfulness of Mr. Meadows, Chris gathered that the party in the box had passed unscathed through the fascina-

tions of a couple of hours, and that they were all very glad of the distraction of his appearance among them.

It seemed to him that a confidence existed on some point between Mr. Meadows and Joan, for immediately after supper he looked at her with a smile that had something of a hint about it. Joan, as well as Chris, saw it, and gave a laugh.

"Ladies and gentleman," she said, "Mr. Meadows, in a moment when I was thrown off my guard by the fascinations of the stage, which we were so earnestly avoiding, got from me a promise to sing in his empty drawing-room. I am going to redeem my promise."

They went upstairs together and found that the rooms had been furnished only with roses. Great jars stood at the foot of each of the unpainted panels containing splendid branches of pink and crimson roses that filled the room with colour and scent. But the four panels which Muriel had painted were allowed to assert themselves without the aid of any natural decoration; and the painter's eyes could not but sparkle when she saw how good was her work.

"I will paint all the others for you, Mr. Meadows," she cried. "Oh, do not doubt that I will fulfil my part of the contract."

"I will bind you down to it," he said. "When I see how exquisite are those which you have already painted, I feel that it would be impossible for me to get a substitute for you to complete the set."

"Oh, yes, I will complete them, never fear," cried Muriel, and Lady Humber felt that she understood less of her nieces now than she had ever done.

And then Joan began to sing, and had just ended the aria from "Mignon" which her host had asked her for, when a servant entered with a long official-looking envelope for Mr. Foxcroft.

"My blessed proofs!" said he. "I hope I may be pardoned if I glance through them in the farthest of the rooms. You will sing again, Joan, and my work will fly on mighty pens."

"Something less Handelian will serve us," said Meadows. "Shall it be something by Gounod?"

Chris retired through the curtains into the farthest of the drawing-rooms, before Joan after a moment of thought struck the first gracious bars of the prelude to the Berceuse.

It is a maiden's life spiritualised by melody, and the maiden who sang it understood what it meant. She understood the pathos of its gaiety, she understood the very heart of its pathos—delicate flutenotes of the bird that one hears faintly through a twilight that melts into moonlight.

When she had breathed those thistledown notes and silence followed, she saw that Muriel was not looking at her, but at the curtains of the arch between the rooms. Mr. Meadows had given a little start as his eyes went in the same direction.

She glanced round and saw that Chris was standing among the curtains with one of the long printed

The long silence that followed was this time due to a certain thoughtfulness on the part of Chris.

At last he spoke. "I wonder if we shall in the course of time get any nearer to the solution of that mystery—the heart of a woman?" he remarked.

"The heart of a woman! What woman?" asked Muriel.

"What woman? Why, 'the' woman," said he.

"'The' woman? Is there only one?" she asked. "My dear Chris, that is the mistake people make. There are some millions of women in the world, and every one of them has a heart of her own."

"I think we may have a fine summer, after all," said Chris after another long pause. "Could anything be lovelier than that young moon with the Evening Star almost in her arms?"

"Does that suggest a fine summer?" she asked.

"I only suggest that love is celestial and that men and women are of the earth," said he.

"Maybe that is the key of the mystery," said she.

* * * * *

But the young moon at which they were looking through the soft May twilight had lost all her youthful figure before a night came when she was observed by at least two of the passengers of the *Carstairs Castle*, now steaming through tranquil seas south of the Line. They were standing very close together, leaning over the bulwarks at a secluded part of the deck, and they did not find it necessary to speak in a louder tone than a whisper.

"I wonder if you still think that I was wrong to come out this voyage?" said he.

"I wonder if I ever did think so?" said she.

"You said so before we had lost sight of the English coast."

"I wonder if I ever did think so?" she repeated.

"I felt that I should have remained a stowaway until we had reached Madeira and you got that telegram reassuring you about your father. I felt conscious of having thrust myself between you and your sorrow. My dearest Joan, if you had not received that news which set your mind at rest, I believe that I should never have told you all that was in my heart."

"And have you done so now?" she asked.

There was silence while they looked out together at the moon and at the Star of Love. The Star of Love had no longer the arms of the moon encircling it. But this deprivation of arms was not experienced by Joan Selwood.

(And yet he had never explained to her what was the exact nature of his Theory of Woman.)

* * * * *

And the silver sickle of the moon had become her golden shield before Muriel and Chris were laughing over the most recklessly uncondensed telegram which each of them had received from Cape Town.

They had got so much to say on the subject of the message, that Chris was at the point of leaving Lady Humber's boudoir house before Muriel remembered

that she had got a letter from Mr. Vickers, enclosing one which he had received from Mr. Mellor.

This was Mr. Mellor's letter to Mr. Vickers :

"DEAR SIR,—I have heard with pride, as every man worthy of the name of Englishman must have done, of the gallantry of our friend Colonel Selwood, C.B., in the field, and rejoice, as every man worthy of inheriting the glorious traditions of our country must, to learn that his wound has not proved serious. But I confess that the thought of our gallant friend filled me with the deepest self-reproach. You may not be aware that Colonel Selwood and I had once a serious difference of opinion on the question of the ownership of some shares in the Rockingham Bank. I will not now enter into the question as to which of us was right in this matter. I have adopted a course which I think will be approved of by all who have the Cause of the Empire at heart, and now enclose you the warrants for all the Rockingham Bank shares, begging that you will have the goodness to have them transferred without delay to Colonel Selwood, and have the transference formally registered. I hope that Colonel Selwood's amiable daughters will recognise that my only motive in adopting this course is one of gratitude to Providence for having spared the life of their gallant father to his country.

"I am, dear Sir,

"Yours very faithfully,

"JOSEPH MELLOR.

"P.S.—May I beg of you to allow no delay to take place in registering the transfer of the shares?"

Chris read the letter and laughed.

"What is the fellow up to now?" he said.

"I have not the least idea," said Muriel. "Mr. Vickers advises our acceptance of the shares; but I wrote to him yesterday saying that even if we were starving, we would have nothing to do with the shares."

"Of course you would have nothing to do with them," said Chris. "But what I should like very much to know is what Mellor means by this tardy act of reparation?"

He had a good deal of light thrown on this point by a telegram which he read among the ordinary news at his office that night, stating that the Rockingham Bank had suspended payment.

The concern was far too high-class ever to have been reconstructed in accordance with the Companies Acts: it was not "Limited," and thus every shareholder had the privilege of being individually responsible for the deficiency of two millions odd sterling.

And this was how it came about that, a week later, the sellers of the evening papers increased the attractiveness of their contents bill by the line, "Bankruptcy of Mr. Mellor."

THE END.

